



## **Care and Storage of Tack during the Off-Season**

Dr. Mark Russell – Assistant Professor Equine Extension

By now, most horse owners in Arkansas are winding down their season of shows, trail rides, and other events or functions across the state. With the exception of a few trail riders and those who are still showing some, most riders are done for awhile. With organized events also slowing considerably for the next few months, horse owners are finding themselves having some extra time on Saturdays and in the evenings during the week. One of the most important things we can do during this time is properly clean our tack and store it.

Tack (saddles, bridles, halters, etc.) represents a large investment for most horse owners. For many of us, it has taken years for us to accumulate and look at as a collection that we can be proud of. Proper care can prolong the useful life and the appearance of tack and can prevent injuries resulting from broken or poorly fitting tack. Dr. Cindy McCall of Auburn University lays out some tips to follow when preparing for time away from riding:

1. Saddles, bridles, halters and blankets should be checked for fit in the fall (and periodically throughout the year) because the horse's body shape and size will change as it gets older or as its level of fitness changes. A thorough safety check should be made on all tack, especially before use. Areas where leather meets metal, such as around metal buckles or fasteners, and stress points such as girths, cinches, stirrups and reins, should be inspected closely. Worn, cracked or rotten areas and broken or weak stitching are definite signs that the tack needs to be repaired or replaced. While it's often most convenient to hang a halter on the gate to the pasture, this can also cause the material (that it's made of) to weaken and/or get stiff.
2. Before storage, leather tack should be thoroughly cleaned and conditioned to prevent damage from dirt, sweat, mildew or dryness. To properly clean leather, use a glycerin-based soap or a saddle soap that is at least fifty percent fat. Because dampness damages leather, use a minimum of water for cleaning.
3. Squeeze all excess water out of the sponge or cleaning rag, wipe it over the soap without working up a lather and apply the soap to the tack. Work the soap into the leather paying particular attention to sweaty and dirty areas. The small, greasy dirt globules that form on tack (called jockeys) may have to be gently scrapped off with a knife or fingernail. Allow

tack to dry naturally. Applying heat or setting the saddle in the sun draws oils from the leather resulting in cracking and breaking of the leather fibers. After the leather has dried, apply a conditioner. Conditioners should be rubbed into the leather until a shine comes to the surface of the leather. Conditioners should be mostly animal fats, such as lanolin. Petroleum-based products can damage vegetable-tanned leather and weaken the stitching on the tack. Neat's foot oil is a traditional conditioner made from the bones and hooves of cattle, but it will darken the leather. There are many conditioners on the market that will not darken tack if lighter colored leather is desirable.

4. After conditioning, leather should be covered with a fabric cover so that it can breathe and stored in dry, cool environment. Attics are generally too hot and basements are generally too damp for ideal leather storage. The storage area should also be relatively free of insects and rodents which often chew on leather. If leather is going to be stored for a long time, it should be periodically checked and reconditioned. Leather strapping such as stirrup leathers, bridles and reins should be unassembled and stored flat if possible. Saddles should be stored on a saddle rack so that they maintain their original shape.

Horsemen who ride throughout the year will not need to worry about storing their tack for the winter. However, they still need to make routine fit and safety checks on their tack, and they should clean and condition it periodically. Purists recommend cleaning tack after each use, but many horse owners simply do not have the time. A tip for busy riders is to use a combination cleaner-conditioner for tack for frequent cleanings and then use the traditional cleaning and conditioning procedure for major cleanups. There are several combination leather cleaner-conditioners on the market, or they are easy to make by melting a bar of glycerin saddle soap in a saucepan over low heat on the stove, then adding approximately one pint of a leather conditioner and one to two tablespoons of vegetable oil. Mix these ingredients thoroughly and pour into a plastic container with a tight fitting lid. As the mixture cools it will solidify into a soap-like consistency. It is applied to the leather with a damp sponge or cloth like saddle soap. Thank you to Dr. Cindy McCall of Auburn University for her recommendations.