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## HOW TO...

# Clean and Care for Leather

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, Equine Ergonomist

Taking proper care of your leather goods will greatly enhance their appearance and lifespan. One of the greatest misconceptions in leather care has been with the correct use of saddle soaps. Saddle soaps are basically just what their names imply: soaps, and as such are to be used for cleaning only. In fact, sweat, which is acidic, and soap are the two greatest enemies of leather if they are not removed. Saddle soap should be used to rid the leather of accumulated sweat and grime which, if left on, will result in the leather becoming brittle and cracking. It is important to keep your saddle and other leather goods clean so they don't irritate your horse's skin, and to protect your investment.

Soaps containing glycerines or built-in moisturizers are beneficial in that they remove less of the natural lubricants of the leather during washing. But just as you rinse off the soap after washing your hands, make sure you completely rinse your leather of the soap product, as water will harm leather much less than the chemicals in the soap.

Living skin is made up of 70 to 80 percent water, and leather is essentially skin which has been tanned. After tanning, a moisture content of about 25 percent is retained. In the past, leather was tanned over a six-month period and was more durable, but nowadays the tanning process takes only about six weeks. Every time you wash or clean your saddle – even with soaps containing glycerine – you need to rinse



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with water and then apply moisturizer, just as hand lotion is often applied to return moisture to your own skin. Tanned hides are much like our own skin except that they cannot replenish lost moisture content.

A leather moisturizer/conditioner will return some of the natural lubricants. A conditioner that contains balsam but no cleaning ingredients is highly recommended, as it can effectively be used on all leather items. Leather oil can be used as a one-time application over the entire saddle or other tack to darken the original colour. After that initial application, oil should only be used on the saddle panel as a lubricant, since the wool will soak up any excess. Used on the seat, it will soak through and onto the laminated and glued layers of the tree, possibly resulting in the eventual breakage of the tree (especially if you have an English spring tree). Even with saddles built on other trees, applying oil more often is not recommended. Oil should not be used anywhere the leather comes into contact with your person (breeches, gloves) as it tends to discolour these materials. In addition, oil on the flaps leads to such a softening of the leather as to make the flaps too flexible. Make sure you use products that are meant for leather. Baby oil belongs on babies, olive oil belongs in salad dressing – neither belong on leather.

Ideally, saddlery should be cleaned each time it is used. At the least, it should be given a quick cleaning (wipe) after each use, and thorough cleaning once a week. To store your saddle or tack over a longer period of time, keep it at room temperature, but never cooler than five degrees Celsius, and at a humidity of 30 to 40 percent to retain the suppleness of the leather. If mildew appears, a good wash and a leather conditioner will soon restore it.



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