

ARAPAHOE HUNT CLUB

THE CARE OF QUALITY LEATHER

All leathers are not equal. Western saddles are easily distinguished from our more functional English saddles found in the Hunt field. Likewise, the subtle distinctions between cowboy leather and traditional English leather are important to the serious horseperson. The Western and English Manufacturers' Association publishes a guide to the proper use, cleaning and care of their leather goods. The most ignored instruction is "do not soak English leather products in oil or apply hot oil to them."

Oil, any oil, can be the enemy of traditionally tanned english leather. Oil swells leather fibers and lubricates the spaces between the fibers. Strap goods (bridles, etc.) become greasy, thicker, soft, subject to stretching and premature breaking. Oil attracts dirt. Dirt drawn into leather acts as an abrasive compound to enlarge any crack or blemish. Oil pulls dirt into stitching. Grit acts as minuscule knives to cut threads.

Warm oil soaking is fatally destructive to fine English tannage. Natural tallow is a mark of quality in leather. It is left in and added to the longest lasting, strongest leathers. All oils, most dramatically warm oil applications, displace natural tallow. In other words, as soon as a \$ 200 bridle is soaked in oil, the leather is immediately reduced to the quality of a \$ 20 bridle. Oil evaporates to leave leather impregnated with sludge and dirt. Oil must be replaced. Reapplications of oil damage leather repeatedly.

What's good for quality English tannage? Attention to appearance! Dirty, poorly kept leather is ugly and unsafe. Don't be afraid to use soap and water. Effective saddle soap washings consist of at least two foamy latherings. A soft fingernail brush, or your fingernail, will help remove tough spots. Excessive, longstanding filthy grease may call for a quick dip in a solution of Dawn Dishwashing Soap. (About the same amount you'd use for a sink full of dishes.) (Did you know that environmentalists prefer Dawn to cleanse oil-fouled fowl?)

Leather should be treated periodically, as needed, with a leather dressing or preserver that has a tallow base with a natural wax added. Mixtures that provide a good diet for leather often have the consistency of butter or bird suet. They require vigorous hand rubbing for application. Or, one may use a hair dryer to speed up penetration. Caution: do not heat leather any warmer than your hand wants to touch.

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All leather eventually shows wear by getting fuzzy or by exposing little hairs when it is abraded or cut edges are not sealed. Any hairy spot on leather is a "red alert!" Seats and curves on saddles are especially vulnerable. Treat any wear spot immediately by rubbing in pure beeswax or by painting on liquified candle wax after first warming the leather. Quality candle wax contains at least 51% beeswax. If the hairs show up again, repeat as needed. Hairy leather tells you that the leather is disintegrating at that point.

But when all is said and done, a most venerated and loved "Grande Dame" of our Colorado horse world usually rides with a bridle no one could fault for appearance. To my knowledge, she uses nothing but a quick and easy commercial product, Horseman's Onestep. Perhaps by the time you become a "Grande Dame" or the equivalent, your fingers will be magic, too!

Charles Groesbeek

Bob Knox's Homemade version of Horseman's Onestep:

1	liter	Lexol Leather Conditioner
4	7 oz.	Grated glycerin saddle soap (the cheap kind!)
2	cups	Corn oil

Heat Lexol on medium to medium-high heat in a 3 pound empty coffee can or an old teflon coated dutch oven. Add grated soap to warmed Lexol and stir until dissolved. Add corn oil and stir until blended well. Place pan in a sink with cold water so that the pan is surrounded. Ice can be added to the water in the sink to induce the cooling period. Stir frequently to keep the oil from separating from the mixture. When the mixture begins to thicken, store in the freezer overnight. Take out of the freezer and store at room temperature in a covered container. (This makes quite a lot and could easily be shared by a few people.) A LITTLE of this soap goes a LONG way! Bob says the secret to the recipe is really cheap saddle soap!