

Protective Legwear

Using protective legwear is a smart and easy way to protect your horse's legs from bumps, bangs and strains.

By Jennifer Warner

3-31-2003

Have you ever brushed over a small scab on the inside of your horse's leg or noticed his reaction to a tender spot around his fetlock, but then put it out of your mind because it seemed insignificant? When you go down the trail, do you occasionally hear your horse's shoes clank together and think he's just overextending his stride? Even the most balanced movers will occasionally overreach, running the risk of pulling off a front shoe with their back toe or, worse, clipping the bulb of their heel. With the precision footwork demanded of many performance horses, an interference-related abrasion is inevitable, and sometimes even the most conformationally correct horse will track less than perfectly and bang himself. If your horse does any of these things, protective legwear may prevent minor injuries, as well as give him additional, much-needed support when you are pushing him to peak performance levels.

What's Out There

There are basically two types of protective legwear. Interference boots protect the horse's legs from bumps and abrasions while working. These include bell boots, splint and shin boots, sid boots and jumping boots. Hock and knee boots also protect the horse, but are not typically used when the horse is working.

Support boots, also called sports medicine boots, offer the horse both protection from interference and added support to the soft-tissue structures of the leg.

A variety of protective legwear products have been designed for specific kinds of problems and disciplines. Starting at the bottom and moving up the horse's leg, legwear includes the following:

Bell boots protect the coronary band, the heel bulbs and the back of the hoof. They are available in both leather and synthetic materials, with the latter being the most popular. Some pull on, some use buckles and some have hook-and-loop closures. Petal boots come with plastic petals that slide on and off a strap to adjust them to any size. Bell boots are particularly useful for the horse that forges or overreaches. They help keep eggbar or other therapeutic shoes from being pulled off, protect an injured or tender hoof, or simply reduce potential hoof injuries.

"I use boots for turnout, more than for anything," says Pam Baker of Hillcrest Farms in Bealeton, Virginia, who trains national hunter champions. "I don't take any unnecessary chances that my horses could play and hurt themselves. All my horses with eggbar shoes wear bell boots over them."

Interference boots, sometimes called ankle boots, protect both the front and back ankle joints from interference-related abrasions. Made of synthetic materials or leather, these boots are useful for a horse with imperfect conformation that may cause him to track closely or move with an unbalanced gait. They also offer protection for the horse that is subjected to intense competition, such as jumpers or other horses that wear studs in their shoes.

Sports medicine boots wrap completely around the lower leg and have a support strap under the fetlock. They are usually made of neoprene lined with soft padding. Some sports medicine boots are made with an attached bell boot for complete leg protection. Their purpose is to absorb concussion as the horse's hoof hits the ground, thereby reducing the risk of tendon and ligament injury. Veterinarians are also prescribing them for horses that have suffered and now are recovering from a bowed tendon or ligament injury, and for horses with arthritis and windpuffs, says Dal Scott, president and CEO of Professional's Choice Inc., makers of the SMB II sports medicine boot.

Sports medicine boots will benefit any performance horse, says Scott. For instance, one of the common problems with dressage horses is with the hocks and stifle, because they are asked to extend so far up underneath themselves. "Sports medicine boots benefit more than just the part of the anatomy that they fit," he says. "They support the entire musculo-skeletal system of the horse. When used on the (dressage horse's) hind legs, they reduce or eliminate hock problems."

Splint and shin boots protect the bone and soft tissues (tendons and ligaments) of the lower legs. They are called splint boots because they are designed to protect the splint bone. Splint boots can be used on both front and rear legs to protect

the inside of the lower leg from being hit with an opposite foot. These boots typically have additional padding sewn into the inside of the boot for added protection.

Jumping boots are somewhat similar in design to splint boots, but with an open front. They are designed to protect the check ligament and the top of the tendons, as well as the splint bones and suspensory ligament. Horses likely to overreach with their hind legs and catch a front leg as they jump can benefit from jumping boots.

Skid boots prevent burning or chafing of rear fetlocks and pastern joints during sliding stops and turns demanded in many western performance disciplines, particularly cutting and reining.

Polo wraps got their name because they were originally popular among polo players. Their usefulness has long since expanded into most every other discipline. Polo wraps, usually made of cotton-blend fabric, offer wide-spectrum protection, depending on how they are used. People who use polo wraps like them because of their versatility, since different parts of the leg can be protected, depending on how they are applied. Using polo wraps, however, requires some experience, since a leg can be easily damaged by a wrap that has been applied improperly. They also require more maintenance than leg boots in order to maintain their usefulness and elasticity.

Proper Fit

Selecting the correct style and size, and putting protective legwear on correctly is important and frequently misunderstood. If you have questions about fit or sizing, call the manufacturer or ask your tack dealer before purchasing a product.

Care and cleaning must also be considered before you purchase legwear, since keeping such items clean and in supple condition is imperative. Hunter trainer Baker prefers washable leg boots made of synthetic materials. "Just keeping leather soft and supple is hard," says Baker. "And if you don't keep boots clean, they rub." She notes that horses with white legs seem to be more sensitive to irritation. She also prefers certain types of bell boots over others. "Rubber bell boots probably stay on the best. I don't like leather ones because they are too hard to keep supple."

Simply reading the instructions before putting the legwear on the horse could help prevent common problems, says Les Vogt, 15-time world reining champion and developer of the Pro Equine Athletic Sport Boots. Manufacturers typically place logos on the front, include instructional pamphlets in leg-boot packages and take other obvious steps to help prevent damage done to horses by improperly applied gear. Some boot advertisements, like one from State Line Tack, carry warnings about correct fit: "It is possible to cause harm to a horse's leg by improperly applying a bandage or galloping boot. Anyone who intends to use lower-leg support devices should seek competent training in the use of these items before applying them to a horse."

Although some applications may seem obvious, the amount of pressure needed to tighten a boot enough to keep it from slipping, yet not so tight that it causes damage, is a judgment call. Splint boots, for example, come in pairs, with a designated left and right. Pads go to the inside of the leg and tabs to the back. The pad is usually wider at the bottom to protect the fetlock joint. Over-tightening boots can lead to a bowed tendon, and with the more lightweight designs, it is easy to put a boot on too tightly.

Another problem is putting boots on too loose. If a leg boot is applied too loosely, it will slip down and rub the back of the fetlock joints or the bulbs of the heel and create soreness.

When Not to Use Boots

There are some times when even Vogt, who says he uses boots for nearly every occasion, doesn't use them. He recommends removing boots when riding in foxtail, burr grass or on the beach. "Sand will adhere to the boots, and if you ride for too long, it will turn into sandpaper," says Vogt. It's important, whatever the riding surface, to remove the boots and empty them of any accumulated debris, and to clean the horse's legs regularly every few hours.

Using bell boots requires special attention. "I can't argue with protecting your investment or preventing injury," says Dr. Joyce Harman, D.V.M., of Harmany Equine Clinic in Washington, Virginia. "But when you look at the comfort of the horse, especially with bell boots, the horse's freedom and natural movement is somewhat altered." As a veterinarian, Dr. Harman sees horses with scarred pasterns from wearing bell boots. The damage isn't prompted by any one material, but rather from poor fit, she says. Before scars become apparent, tissue is very raw and sore — observable to even novice riders as they put the boots on or take them off.

Bruce Olsen of Montrose Quarter Horses in Richmond, Virginia, is a former rodeo rider who now primarily trains young reining horses. He doesn't use boots often, just skid boots if the longer hair on the hind fetlocks wears off or if he's riding in an arena with very grainy dirt. He checks the boots frequently for dirt and sand that can build up and cause raw spots.

"When I learned to dance, my partner stepped on my feet to get them out of the way," says Olsen. "Sometimes if you allow a young horse to bump into himself, he'll learn where to put his feet a little faster. If it becomes a chronic problem, I'll put a boot on so they don't injure themselves, and I'll start altering my training, trying to teach them where to place their feet. On young horses, I don't use boots, and I don't shoe in front, just in the rear."

Olsen thinks that boots do have a place on some older, frequently injured horses, but using them on a young horse can simply teach him to continue interfering with his own legs. "When I start hurrying horses up, and if they're shod in front after they have the cadence, I'll put boots on them. If I see a horse that overreaches and hurts himself in the front, I'll put bell boots on him. But it isn't something I automatically go to."

"Sometimes, just like other things, boots can cause problems rather than cure them," says Olsen. "If you have to boot up a young horse, you'd better look at what you're asking them to do. It's like setting your clock ahead so you won't be late. I don't think it's necessary. If you're asking a young horse to do too much when he's tired, you're probably doing too much in your training program."

When Are Boots Effective?

Like Olsen, most trainers and vets agree that legwear, particularly sports medicine boots, can support horses with chronic leg problems or a recuperating leg injury. They will also help the horse that has an incurable problem, such as an aged equine with weakened fetlock joints. But these boots are also beneficial to the sound, healthy performance horse on which great athletic demands are made. Regardless of what type of riding you do or how much you demand of your horse, if you notice scars, heat, scratches or scrapes on the inside of your horse's legs or heels, you may want to talk with a trainer or veterinarian about adding equine legwear to your list of necessary equipment.

Read more on the proper use of protective boots >>