

Show-Ring Turnout

A well-groomed and smartly turned out horse just might give you that extra edge in the show-ring.

By Sharon Biggs

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You ride into the arena and look around you, taking in all the beautiful western pleasure horses groomed and saddled to perfection. Suddenly, you see yourself in the reflection of the arena windows. You are sitting on your beautiful bay American Quarter Horse gelding, resplendent in his Roy Rogers parade saddle complete with tapaderos and Mexican-silver conchos. His hooves shimmer with bright, glittery paint, and roses braided into his long, flowing mane match a bright-pink bow tied into his forelock...

Wait a minute! Fear strikes your heart as you realize that you don't look like any of the other riders — not a tapadero or rosebud in sight. The judge beckons to two men standing by the in-gate and then gestures at you. The audience begins to laugh as the men escort you from the ring. Yes, it's the fashion police. You've committed a terrible crime and now you are going to pay...

Suddenly you wake in the middle of the night, drenched in a cold sweat. You turn on the light, look around your room and see the brand-new woven-wool saddle pad draped over your closet door and the beautiful double-eared bridle with its silver conchos hanging on the doorknob. You fall back to sleep, relieved that this fashion faux-pas was merely a horrible dream.

Who hasn't had this dreadful dream the night before a big show, or any show for that matter? Every good show rider knows that it's important to present a polished, well-turned-out show horse to the judge, and not a fashion victim living in the past. And even though beautiful tack does not replace good training and riding, it can be that one final touch that puts you in front of a horse and rider that are equally as good.

Saddleseat

The saddleseat horse encompasses many breeds, including the Arabian, Saddlebred, National Show Horse and Morgan. While this section focuses primarily on Saddlebred fashions, the trends are basically the same for all breeds, with Arabian owners preferring flashier colors.

Lance Bennet, owner of Bennet Saddlery and Bennet Riding Academy in Carlsbad, California, describes the properly turned-out saddleseat horse. The Whitman's Campbell cutback saddle is the most popular saddle, he says. The smooth bridle leather that covers the seat and flaps is preferred over the stamped or pigskin-printed leather. It gives a bit more stability to the rider. Havana brown has always been the preferred color. "Nothing much changes with saddleseat horses; styles basically stay the same. The girth is white, made of plastic fiber with a patent-leather look, and no saddle pad is used," Bennet says.

The only thing that does change with saddleseat horses, as far as tack goes, is the cavason set — the noseband and browband. Bennet says that these come in a variety of colors to complement the horse's coat and the rider's apparel. Different shades of red, navy, black, gray and blue are popular, as well as shades of brown. The headstall is Havana brown to match the saddle. "What's popular this year is a ½-inch, laced equitation snaffle rein instead of the smooth rein," adds Bennet. "These are getting used more by amateur riders outside of equitation classes. Some riders have a tendency to pull up on the curb too much with the smooth rein — you get a better feel with the laced rein — and it's easier to tell the difference between the curb and the snaffle."

As for grooming, braiding depends on the division, but basically long manes and tails are required. Tails are left natural and unbraided, and hopefully drag the ground. If braiding is required, a ribbon is plaited into the forelock and into a single long braid in the mane. "Most riders take the forelock off and make a fake braid. It's really difficult to get the braid centered properly, and it has to last all day. A really good braid job shows no hair sticking up at all. It's much easier to just attach a false one," Bennet says.

Four inches of mane is clipped to make a bridle path, with some manes completely roached. Three-gaited saddlebreds are required to have roached manes. Natural manes and tails (not set) are required for pleasure horses. The hooves are sanded, polished and lacquered to match the natural color of the feet.

The Hunter

Nancy Reed, an AHSA R judge and trainer of hunters in Bonita, California, describes how this traditional sporthorse should be turned out. "The trend in saddles is going back to the French style, meaning deeper seats and more knee rolls," she says. "Today, courses are more technical, and the rider is finding the need for more support. The preferred colors are either Havana brown or the London tan, which can be stained a specific color preference." Miley Baird of Dominion Saddlery, located at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center, says the hottest thing right now is the Devoucoux, a French saddle that can be custom fit to the rider's specifications. "Every one of these saddles is beautiful and well made," he says. Being custom made, they cost about \$3,700. On a more affordable note, "the Crosby Centennial is the biggest seller because it fits a lot of horses and has a deeper seat and more knee rolls," says Baird. Saddle pads are shaped white fleece with a small amount of white showing.

The bridles are no longer thin, but slightly raised, square and with a simple, understated browband. However, the bridle style depends on the horse's head. Gold browbands and heavy stitching are no longer used, although small fancy stitching is popular. The reins are braided or laced, sometimes square-raised halfway up the rein. "The Edgewood bridle or the Jimmy's 21st Century are the best sellers," says Baird. "Also, every hunter has a matching standing martingale for jumping. You can buy one piece at a time and oil everything to match if you can't afford to buy everything at once." The large D-ring snaffle bits are the most popular.

"Riders braid only at A-rated shows and even reserve braiding the tails for the bigger shows," Reed says. Baird agrees: "People stopped braiding at the smaller shows years ago; it's very rare to see braiding outside of large shows. When people do braid, they use a professional braider who charges about \$30 for a mane and about the same for a tail." Guidelines for braiding are 22 to 35 button braids for hunters, braided on the right side only and tied with matching yarn. Tails are not banged, but left natural, then perhaps French braided and finished with a pinwheel. Hooves are oiled.

The Dressage Horse

Jane Weatherwax, an R-rated dressage judge and trainer in Escondido, California, has observed the tack trends in this aspect of the show world for more than 15 years. "Sophisticated and conservative are the names of the game in dressage," she says. However, some things are fading out, such as the white-lined bridle. Solid bridles are becoming more popular, with perhaps a browband with some metal decoration. Pretty browbands are the thing for a pretty head. I'm also noticing more brown tack."

Sandy Hill from Tack in the Box, a leading supplier of dressage tack and equipment in Salem, Oregon, agrees. While black was the dominant color for decades, brown tack is on the upswing because of Michelle Gibson and Peron, as well as other members of the 1996 Olympic team, choosing brown tack over black, she says.

Hill says that Passier bridles and saddles are flying out the door and replacing the Neidersuess in popularity. Although Neidersuess is an excellent saddle and is used by the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, many people are finding less need for the support of the Neidersuess seats. "The leather quality of Passier is also very good," Hill adds. But don't go shopping just based on trends. It is important to choose the saddle that fits you and your horse best, and not choose one just because it is popular.

Saddle pads are white with black trim or solidblack, and are normally square. The shaped pad, however, which follows the line of the saddle, is making a comeback. If you like to be on the cutting edge, the swallowtail saddle pad may be for you. It's basically a square pad, but with a section in the back cut out to resemble a swallowtail. The benefit of this pad is that the whip contacts the side of the horse better, allow for a gentler tap.

Europeans tend to prefer the more decorative browbands, but these have yet to catch on in the United States. "We are selling more solid leather bridles with conservative browbands," says Hill. "But the trend is leaning toward buckles instead of hook ends, usually silver buckles, with brass being reserved for double bridles."

Grooming of the dressage horse is also very traditional. Manes are pulled, not cut. Standard hunter braids are acceptable, and are braided to the left or the right side of the crest with color-coordinated yarn. Dressage horses generally sport fewer braids than hunters — 17 to 22 braids total. You can line the braids with white tape if you wish although taping is less common these days. Keep in mind that your horse should have a nice shape to his neck if you choose to tape. The tail is unbraided but banged — cut flat across on the bottom. Some people choose to shave or pull the hairs alongside the top of the tail, which accentuates the hindquarters of the horse. "Although there is no rule regarding braiding, it is a sign of respect for the sport," says Weatherwax. "I don't mind seeing a bad braid job, because I know that the person at least tried. Braiding also shows an overall appearance of neatness and preparedness by the rider." Hooves are oiled rather than sanded and polished.

Western Pleasure

Western pleasure is definitely the showiest way, apart from costume classes, to exhibit your horse. The choices of beautiful leather and silver saddles give the rider a chance to show his or her originality and personality. Simple headstalls adorning a pretty head or a colored saddle pad that brings out the highlights in a coat make this class a favorite among many. Alex Ross of Greensboro, North Carolina, is an expert in this area, with 27 years of experience in showing and training western pleasure horses. He is also a judge and director for the AQHA and National Snaffle Bit Association.

"A tooled, light-oiled leather saddle with silver conchos and plates on the cantle and swells is popular," says Ross. "The trend in silver leans toward corners — conchos are more square-shaped, and the saddle conchos match the bridle. Stirrups are usually basic, no oxbows. Dark Saddles are not a detriment; we like to think that our judges judge on the merits of the horse and not the equipment." Silver styles can be changed on saddles.

Saddle pads are an important part of the whole western pleasure picture. "Lots of riders go with colors that match their outfits, mainly solid, not a Navajo," Ross says. "Some have leather on the bottom edge of the pad with some tooling or conchos." The cinch is still usually made of neoprene or leather, but string girths are starting to make a little bit of a comeback.

Bridles can show a bit more personality. Two-eared or one-eared bridles without browbands are popular, although snaffle or hackamore horses should have a two-eared headstall or one with a browband for stability. "The reins are basic leather; nothing's really changed there," says Ross.

Donna Campuzzano of Mary's Tack and Feed in Del Mar, California, adds, "Horsehair tassels on the side of the bridle, braided rawhide with silver and gold detail, and square conchos on the cheekpieces of the bridle are very popular, although it varies between breeds. However, anything goes more now than in the past. The new is blending with the old."

The grooming of the western pleasure horse is basically the same for most breeds, although there are some small variations. Arabian horses, for example, are shown with a longer bridle path and unpulled manes. The bridle paths for other breeds are clipped 4 inches from the ears, and manes are pulled short or cut. "The mane is banded in small sections with rubber bands to lay the mane down closer to the neck," says Ross. "This streamlines the neck and makes the hair stay put. The tail is long, not dragging the ground but close, and the tail is natural on the end. The hooves are sanded and polished with black lacquer or oiled with hoof dressing. We also highlight the eyes and muzzle with a clear lotion," he adds.

Whatever discipline you choose, dress to impress, but remember that hard work, preparation and good horsemanship are the keys to success. Clothes are not the only things that make the horse. Pretty tack is just the icing on the cake.