

Well Heeled

By Cindy Hale

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You've probably heard the old saying that you can't really understand someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes. Just alter that a little to fit the horse world. You really can't understand a horse person until you've walked a mile in their boots. Think about it. Imagine your favorite pair of boots: broken in, comfortable. Where have they taken you? How many stirrups have felt the toe of your boots slide gently into place? Those are the thoughts I had recently when I polished my show boots for the very last time. I no longer had any use for them, and so I gave them one last rubbing to burnish the glow in the leather, and then dropped them off at the local consignment tack store.

I remember when I bought that pair of boots. I had to make an appointment at a tack store an hour away where I could sit in my breeches and knee socks and have my legs measured for a precise fit. I'd saved up for them over a period of several months, but even then it was tough for me to scrimp together the purchase price. Since I knew the owner of the tack store where I ordered them, I was allowed to make payments while I waited for their arrival.

I realize that fancy riding boots are a luxury item. Believe me, I would've rather spent my money on something else, but I was cursed with long, skinny calves and bony ankles, and off-the-shelf field boots were never tall enough or narrow enough to fit me. (Before you get envious, let me assure you that my legs are nothing to covet. Throughout my teen years I was nicknamed, "Bird Legs.") Stuck with such conformation, and being a devoted huntseat equitation rider, I've needed custom made boots throughout my riding career. Fortunately, well-made boots last for years. In fact, those were only my third pair of custom boots in four decades of showing. But they were my favorite.

I won medal classes in those boots. But they also served in less glorious capacities. I wore them while longeing horses in the warm-up ring before classes. I've trudged up to countless horse show offices and concession stands in them. The dirt of long forgotten show arenas have been ground into those soles as I walked off jumper courses or helped my sister school her horse over practice jumps. Ultimately, though, those boots were what I was wearing when I fell from my mare and was badly injured. I remember saying to the EMT, "Please don't cut off my boots!" Once I was totally immobilized and sedated in the emergency room, someone, somehow, coaxed them off my legs. That must've been tough, because those boots fit my legs like gloves.

I haven't worn them since. It's not because I believe they are possessed with any bad mojo. It's just that I'm wearing lace-up Ariat or Justin ropers nowadays.

And so I caressed the buttery softness of that calfskin leather one last time. I knocked the last tidbits of sand off the soles, and wondered, "Is that from Del Mar or the Oaks?" Then I walked into the consignment shop and filled out a form, leaving the boots to be sold to someone else. They have plenty of life left in them. I'm sure a deserving rider—who also might go by the nickname of Bird Legs—will snatch them up and consider them a true bargain. That would be wonderful. Then my lovely boots will enjoy a second life. And someone else can walk miles in them.

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