

## Are Spurs for You?

**Before you strap on a pair of spurs, consider what these experts have to say about them.**

*By Jennifer Nice*

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In every western riding discipline, from western pleasure and roping to cutting, reining and working cow horse events, spurs can be found among the rider's repertoire of equipment. It's rare to see a cowboy or cowgirl riding without them. If a horn is on the horse's saddle, you will more than likely find spurs on the rider's boots.

Have you ever wondered why all western riders use spurs when all western disciplines are not the same? In fact, there is very little resemblance between a rail class, such as western pleasure, and, say, boxing a cow in a reined cow horse event. In the former, excessive speed is penalized. In the latter, it is essential. Why then, are both riders wearing spurs when what they hope to accomplish is completely opposite?

Spurs are used in different ways in different disciplines to achieve different results. Of course, some riders wear spurs when they really don't need them. But other riders find themselves in situations where wearing a pair of spurs is helpful.

If you are thinking of using spurs on your horse, first consider what the following trainers have to say about them. Their answers to these must-ask questions will help you discover some answers of your own.

Sometimes I feel like my spurs get in the way. What is the proper way to apply them?

Several basic rules should be followed when using spurs. Spurs should be used in addition to leg pressure, not instead of leg pressure. Finally, spurs should be used only if your horse does not respond to your leg cue.

"You always want to apply your calf first, then your spur," says Mike Hachtel of Collinsville, Texas, an American Paint Horse Association and National Snaffle Bit Association judge and multiple world-champion western pleasure trainer.

Hachtel says you must be balanced on your horse before riding with spurs. "You don't want to be leaning forward with your legs back by his flanks. Your legs need to be in the proper position."

Spurs are no substitute for good riding skills. By no means will they help make you a better rider.

"You have to know how to ride a horse correctly before you put spurs on," says Sherryl Crawford of Lipan, Texas, who grew up running cans, trains her own barrel horses and also team ropes. "If you don't really know what you are doing as far as riding or training a horse, and you're also spurring him, you're just going to end up with a big problem that you can't fix."

"Spurs are a good tool if you use them correctly; they're not for looks, and they're not to be used as a weapon," says Earnest Wilson of Tolar, Texas, who is a well-respected Paint Horse trainer with 46 years in the business. Wilson specializes in training horses for cutting, working cow horse, roping and working ranch horse competition.

Spurs should be applied with steady pressure—pressing the spur into the horse's side, not poking him. You can increase the pressure as necessary, but if you poke or jab the horse he's going to lurch or jump. Then you risk grabbing with your legs to hang on, and grabbing his mouth, too. That will simply scare your horse. Many western riders "feather" their spurs, lightly rolling the spur along the horse's side to maintain cadence.

There are so many different types of spurs on the market. What type should I use?

Spurs come with shanks in various lengths and with rowels that vary in severity, or "bite," ranging from soft and mild to sharp and severe (see *The Point of Spurs*). Hachtel is opposed to using any spur that might hurt or sore a horse, and he makes certain that his students don't, either.

"It's my preference to have my youth and amateur riders use spurs that have a very soft rowel," he says.

It is common to see riders using spurs with long shanks and small, soft rowels. The longer shank, Hachtel says, is used for two reasons. "If the horse needs some help keeping his back up, with a longer shank you can get your spur underneath his belly, rather than his side," he explains. "They also help riders who have shorter legs and can't get their legs wrapped around the horse's belly."

Wilson is very careful when it comes to letting his students use spurs. Before he recommends any type of spur, he carefully evaluates the rider. "I evaluate every person and how they use their legs, how they think and how they react, as well as how aggressive or nonaggressive they are," Wilson says. "Then, if my students won't listen, and don't want to learn how to put their leg on the horse properly, I'll take their spurs away from them."

Crawford recommends a soft spur. "I use a very mild rowel, especially for barrel racing," she says. "You don't want to use anything that you might gouge your horse with."

I have a need for speed. Will spurs give me some gas?

If you are looking to up the RPMs on your horse, spurs can be a way to accomplish this. It is what spurs were designed to do—get the horse moving. The key, however, is to use them correctly. Using spurs involves much more than jabbing your horse to make him move faster.

"In barrel racing, spurs are used to move your horse over around the barrels and into the pocket that you are setting for your horse," Crawford says. "Spurs are used to move the horse laterally because the time it takes you to make it around a barrel can cost you the race, regardless of how fast your horse is."

Crawford says spurs' effectiveness depends entirely on the horse. "Some horses need the spurs to get up and go a little better, but others don't need spurs at all," she explains. "Some horses just won't allow you to use spurs on them. They flat out won't tolerate them."

While most speed event and reined cow horse trainers and competitors do use spurs to elicit a faster response, the best riders know how important it is to use them properly.

"Any time you overuse [spurs], you can make the horse frustrated," Wilson says. "What will happen is either you will scare [your horse] or [he will] shut down on you. If you get to really pounding on his belly, the horse will get to where he can't take it any more."

The key to using spurs correctly, Wilson says, is timing. "Spurs are used to either initiate or advance a direct movement. If you use your spurs at the right time and in the right place, the horse will advance. If you use them incorrectly, you can make the horse advance too much or you can make the horse lose his timing."

On a cutting horse, Wilson uses his spurs for one purpose. "Once a horse starts making a turn, I use the spur to advance the horse through the turn and push him forward." This, he says, requires perfect timing. When riding for speed and accuracy, where mere seconds and inches can make the difference between winning and losing, it is important to use your whole body, not just your spurs. "You use your legs to tell your horse what direction to go," Wilson says. "The spurs are used to assist if your horse doesn't go at the speed or willingness you want when asked with your legs."

I'm having some training problems with my horse. Will spurs help?

If after ruling out health problems or poor tack fit you have hit a road block with your horse in terms of training, or he simply isn't respecting your commands, you should always go back to the basics before trying a new or more severe training aid. This philosophy applies to all training aids, including a more severe bit, a tie-down or martingale, or spurs. Always try to work through the problem using basic training principles before resorting to a gadget or gimmick to solve the problem.

If your horse is ignoring your leg cues, or not yielding when you ask him to, spurs may help get his attention. "If you ask your horse to lope off 100 times and he just won't respect you, it doesn't mean that he's a bad horse; it just means that he's a little dull, and you might want to try a spur," Hachtel says.

Once the horse begins to respect the spur, go back to using just your leg. Save the spurs for when your horse needs that occasional reminder.

My horse is young and still green. Is it OK to use spurs on him?

Hachtel starts his 2-year-olds by riding them for 30 to 60 days without using spurs. After that, it depends on the horse. "If that horse goes out there and I press him with my calf and he lopes off, then I probably won't use my spur on him for quite some time," he says. "But if I have to kick on him and kick on him to get him to jog and lope, then I'll use a spur so he doesn't develop any bad habits."

"Use the spurs as a tool to assist you," Wilson says. "They are not the tool to do the training with."

My horse's previous owner always rode with spurs. I assumed I needed to ride with spurs, too, but they seem to make my horse very agitated. What's wrong?

Just because someone has told you that spurs can or should be used on a horse, doesn't mean you should automatically use them. Some horses grow to resent spurs as a result of being abused by them. Other horses are "thin skinned" and cannot tolerate them. The best approach is to start from scratch and determine for yourself what will work best.

"You have to evaluate the horse and see what he responds to," Wilson advises.

A horse agitated by spurs has probably had them used on him harder than necessary or too often.

"When we refer to a horse as being thin skinned, what we really mean is that some horses are more sensitive than others," says Jamie Kerr, DVM, an equine veterinarian in Petaluma, Calif. Horses' skin doesn't vary much in terms of actual thickness, Kerr says. "All horses possess the same dermal layers. However, in some areas, certain layers can be thinner, such as under the belly and tail."

Western pleasure is very competitive. Will teaching my horse to spur stop give me an edge over the competition?

Western pleasure horses have become so specialized in recent years that training them has also become highly specialized. This is most apparent in the way in which spurs are used. While every other discipline uses spurs to speed the horse up, some western pleasure trainers use spurs to slow the horse down. When taught and applied correctly, spurs can be used to control the horse without using the bridle. This somewhat controversial technique is called the spur stop.

"Years ago, [in a western pleasure class] it was OK to lope and then pick up your hands to stop your horse," Hachtel says. "Nowadays, particularly at large shows, you will rarely see exhibitors pick up their hand to stop their horses."

Hachtel is cautious about recommending the spur stop. He frequently sees riders who don't fully understand the technique trying it on their own horses. "What happens then is that [the rider] sticks spurs in the horse and the horse jumps forward three or four feet," he says. "This is why [the spur stop] needs to be learned properly. Riders need to know what will happen if it's done correctly and what could happen if it's done incorrectly."

Horses that have had the spur stop used harder than necessary or too often will raise their necks, wring their tails, or fight your legs and spurs, Hachtel says. "There's some resentment there."

Wilson has mixed feelings about the spur stop. "I have my pros and cons about it," he says. "If used properly, it can be a good tool, but it's not the total answer to stopping a horse. I do think you need to be able to pick up your bridle reins, stop your horse and turn him around."

Although these trainers compete in different western disciplines, they all agree that spurs serve their purpose only if they are used properly. They should never be used as a substitute for solid training or to intimidate the horse.

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