



Selecting a Horse Harness

Points to consider...based on our experience

Purchasing a harness for your equine can be a daunting task, especially when you don't know what to look for or how much to pay for it. Hopefully, this article will help you weed through some considerations for selecting a harness.

First, peruse our article, *“Do I Want a Leather or Synthetic Harness?”* That information will help you make that decision. This article below is going to address quality, comfort, and safety features found on driving horse harnesses.

Now that you know if you want a leather or a synthetic harness, the next consideration is the level of quality. Generally, you pay more for a good quality harness than a poor one. If the price is way too low compared to its counterparts, that should be a “red flag”. When considering a leather harness, be sure to *ask where the leather is from and what method of tanning was used*. There are many ways to process leather hides, and the tanning process can make or break the finished product. Cheap, imported harnesses are made with inferior, chemical or urine tanned leathers that may break VERY easily. There are many harness makers who are using leather that hasn't been properly stuffed, and therefore feels very dry and “papery”. Likewise, if the leather is sopping wet and “droopy”, it hasn't been prepared well, either. Leather with an unpleasant smell is a *dead giveaway* being imported and cheap.

Good leather should have a wonderful, rich, earthy smell that may fade with time; it's not musty and sour. It should be soft in your hand, but still have structure without the “wet noodle” feel. All of our harnesses and parts, both the IVC and Smucker brands, are made with American leather processed by Wickett & Craig, one of only two American tanneries in the US using a labor-intensive, traditional method of vegetable tanning, which produces a superior product: <http://wickett-craig.com/vegetable-tanning/>

Synthetic materials have variation in quality just like leather, so *make sure you ask a harness company where their harness material is sourced*. Our harness maker uses matte Beta® and Granite® coated webbing products from the BioThane® Company in Ohio. These products have a more leathery feel than their imported counterparts. The imported synthetics tend to have a more “plastic-y” or rubbery feel than the American-made BioThane® products.

Nylon harnesses are virtually incomparable to other synthetic harnesses. Typical nylon harnesses tend to be cheaper in construction, more likely to wear quicker than good leather or synthetic, and more apt to rub the horse.

When choosing a synthetic harness, also look at the quality and feel of the stitching. There are popular synthetic harnesses available that have great consumer marketing, but when you run your hand over the stitching, it feels sharp and uncomfortable. That is not what you want to put on your horse.

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Rolled patent leather on breeching

Look at how the edges of both leather and synthetic harnesses are finished. Is rolled material used on parts that are against the horse on the bearing surfaces and sensitive areas, or just flat strapping? Is the harness constructed with padding? Again, this requires more workmanship on the part of the harness maker, hence the extra cost



Cheap single strap leather breeching



Rolled, padded leather girth

verses cheap harnesses. Yes, harness pads can be added to single strap style harnesses, but they may also make the horse physically hotter than not using pads. A pad on the breast collar can also impede the ability for a small horse or pony to breathe well, as the width can get into the airway. A good harness should not require any extra padding (other than rare exceptions which we will not get into).

Now let's consider features. The horse's comfort has become much more important in most aspects of the equine industry than ever before. We have recognized that if the horse is not comfortable, at best you won't get the greatest performance out of him, or at worst, his discomfort may cause an accident when he has finally had enough. Comfort is paramount for a successful drive. Of course, many comfort features require more workmanship, and therefore are not usually found on cheaper harnesses.

Historically, harnesses were made with saddles that concentrated pressure on the top of the horse's back. Nowadays, we have access to styles of saddles that distribute the weight of the vehicle over a greater surface area on the horse's back and down his sides. That is *considerably* more important when driving a two-wheeled cart. Smucker Harness also created the Better Fit Saddle, which provides greater gullet clearance over the horse's spine, allowing him to move more freely with no potential of pinching and binding at the spine.



Smucker Better Fit Saddle

The worst saddles do not have a tree or any structure for support. These saddles generally sit directly on the spine with no gullet clearance. Again, they are usually included with cheaper-made harnesses. They are especially uncomfortable for more narrow horses or older horses whose spine has become more exposed with age. Some of our first harnesses (MANY years ago) were the treeless variety. Our horses eventually became so uncomfortable, they refused to do their job. That helped me realize that I needed to analyze what was happening with the harness. When we switched to a harness with a treed saddle, the "behavior" problems were gone. There are some synthetic harness saddles available that do not have a tree and still provide gullet clearance because of how the padding is arranged, but they are generally included with more-specialized marathon-type harnesses.



Treeless "Strap" Saddle

In our opinion, shaped breast collars are a necessity for equines whose necks tie in low in their chests. Traditional straight breast collars can lay across the windpipe, cutting off the horse's air. You can fit the straight breast collar below the windpipe, but then it might lay across the horse's shoulder, restricting his movement. The shaped collar allows the horse to be able to



move his shoulder effectively as well as breathe at the same time! Above are photos I took of a miniature horse whose neck ties in extremely low compared to his shoulder. I adjusted the breast collar on his new IVC Enhanced Leather harness to be below his windpipe, but then it seemed quite low on his chest. I realized that with how this horse is built, the collar was where it needed to be on this particular horse.

Some breast collars are made quite narrow for either a more refined look for the show ring or to fit in between the windpipe and the point of the shoulder. The narrower the breast collar, the less bearing surface against which the horse has to pull. Less bearing surface can be tolerable for a horse with a very light load, but very uncomfortable with a heavier vehicle and passenger weight, hence why wider breast collars are preferred over narrower ones, as long as they don't interfere with breathing. Some deeper collar shapes can "tip" or "rotate" in draft, utilizing less of the flat bearing surface and lessening the benefit of the wide collar. We are very happy with the bearing surface of our IVC Mid V shaped collar shown above and below. It includes enough shape to clear the windpipe, while maintaining the integrity to lie flat on the horse's chest.



Many cheap, inferior harnesses have single strap neck and hip straps (left). Many times, those single straps do not provide the breast collar or breeching the support they need, which leads to those pieces sagging out of place, making them less effective. Having split straps with two points of connection on the breast collar and the breeching gives those pieces better support to keep them in the proper position.



In talking with one of the world’s premier harness makers, it was his opinion that the bridle is the most important part of the harness to fit correctly and comfortably. An ill-fitting, uncomfortable bridle is akin to a lousy fitting hat or shoes. Poorly fitting clothes make it very hard to concentrate or function at your job! Blinkers (or winkers or blinders...all are correct terminology) should have structural “stays” that keep the blinkers off the horse’s eyes. You will see many cheap harness bridles that close in on the horse’s eyes, making it very uncomfortable for the horse and unsafe for the driver.



Shaped crown

Other bridle features can be included to provide more comfort for the horse. A shaped crown can fit more comfortably around the horse’s ears. A double-buckle noseband with a padded jaw strap avoids the single buckle digging into the jawbones. A rolled throatlatch (only available in leather) has a smooth feel that lays comfortably in the throat of the horse.



Double buckle, padded jaw strap



Rolled leather throatlatch



Conway Buckles

There are other safety/convenience features to consider in a harness. Regular tongued buckles are imperative in our opinion vs. Conway buckles for harness construction. Conway buckles are very inexpensive to use in the construction of a harness. However, not only are they difficult to adjust, but they are also virtually impossible to release in an emergency! Regular tongued buckles are much easier to adjust, and much safer to use.

Traces that buckle into the breast collar allow greater adjustment of the traces verses breast collars with sewn-on traces. They can also eliminate the “tail” of the traces interfering with the vehicle’s singletree or dash because of the adjustment at the shoulder instead of on the singletree. Most importantly, they also provide an additional way to get a downed horse out of the vehicle quickly! By unbuckling the trace at the breast collar, you can avoid the thrashing hind legs of the horse. For more information on steps to remove a horse from a vehicle, see our article, “*What to do in an Emergency*”.



Open tugs with overgirth

Open tugs with an overgirth to hold the shafts from flipping up are quite appropriate for most vehicles. They allow the vehicle shafts to rest lightly in the tugs. Tightly wrapped wrap straps on a wrap strap girth will keep the vehicle from flipping up but will also transfer motion of the vehicle to the horse. Therefore, we prefer the open tugs with the overgirth.



Open tugs with wrap strap girth



Quick Release tugs are a necessity for vehicles with closed loop shafts, but in our opinion, quick release tugs are easier to use on synthetic harnesses because of the thickness of tug bearing straps on a leather harness. There are also other tug options to use with marathon shafts. See our article, “Convert Your Harness for a Marathon Vehicle”.



Synthetic Quick Release Tugs



If you use both traditional and marathon vehicles, Duel-End traces are able to be used with both a regular slot or hook-end singletree as well as with quick release snap shackles on a marathon-type singletree.



Synthetic Duel-End Traces

Keep in mind that more “decoration” on a harness does not necessarily make it a better harness. There are plenty of cheap harnesses that have “fancy” (or gaudy) metals, colors, or patterns. Don’t let that cloud your inspection of the quality of the material and construction. Yes, once you get into the upper-level competition, certain features can be valued by judges, such as raised leather, double stitching, bridle ornaments, etc. We can help you determine what features are beneficial for the level in which you wish to participate.

Finally, when selecting a harness, consider the harness dealer’s reputation and experience. Do they use what they sell? Do they participate in the same type of activities in which you want to participate? How are they going to truly know what you will need for a Combined Driving Event harness (for example) if they haven’t participated in CDEs (or even know what a CDE is)? Do they work with their harness maker to design the harness or are they just ordering it out of a catalog? Do they specialize in driving equipment or just carry some harnesses with the rest of their tack? Is the harness built to your horse’s size, or are only “off the rack” harnesses available (which, many times, do not fit)? Will they exchange parts to make sure your harness fits your horse? Can you purchase certain parts of the harness individually if your horse grows or changes, or you get a new horse?



One more comment on quality. There was one customer who came into our store at a trade show. She was asking if we could supply various parts for her older leather harness to make it work. The more I talked with her, the more concerned I was about her existing harness. Finally, I asked her, “If your harness was a saddle, would you ride in it?” She paused for a second, and then calmly said, “No...I wouldn’t. You’re right, I need a new harness.” As always, please be safe with proper equipment in good condition.

We welcome you to compare our harnesses and we hope you will agree...we offer
The Best Harness for Quality & Features...to Value!

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