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REINER

GET OFF ON THE RIGHT HOOF

NRHA PROS SHARE THEIR LEGWEAR TIPS.

BY GAVIN EHRINGER

FOOTBALL PLAYERS, HOCKEY GOALIES AND baseball catchers wouldn't think of competing without protective equipment. In the rapid-fire world of Reining, riders are equally concerned with protecting their horses from injury. They know that a single misstep, unpredictable ground conditions, a slight mistake on a maneuver like the turnaround, or even an unfortunate trailer mishap can spell major downtime for their equine partner—even permanent retirement.

Protective legwear is a small investment when compared to the vet bills that result from a lameness-inducing injury. Professional trainers know this and make protective legwear an integral part of their daily tacking regimen. It's a wise precaution we all should take. But in the vast market of legwear today, choices can seem daunting. That's when you could use some expert know-how.

In preparing this story, we decided to tap two top NRHA Professionals and ask them to share their routines and give their best legwear advice. Our reining experts were two-time NRHA Futurity Champion Andrea Fappani, currently ranked second all-time in NRHA earnings, and 2013 NRHA Futurity Open Champion Jason Vanlandingham.

Though both take slightly different approaches to protective gear, they each agree that one should strive to use legwear proactively to prevent injury rather than wait and have to use it to rehabilitate an already injured horse. That means using the equipment at the right time, in the correct way, for the right reasons. Here's what the pros have to say on the subject.

Starting with Splint Boots, Quick Wraps, and Polo Wraps

Starting colts and fillies, of course, is a big part of any professional's trade. To get their horses off on the right hoof, both riders begin training with easy-to-apply splint boots or their "quick wrap" variation.

"Once 2-year-olds have been handled with 30 days of riding, I'll start using NRHA Corporate Partner Classic Equine splint boots," said Fappani, who trains at NRHA Million Dollar Owner Rancho Oso Rio in Scottsdale, Arizona. "We recommend—and use—splint boots for the babies."

Vanlandingham of Whitesboro, Texas, likes to use "EZ Wrap II" boots also manufactured by NRHA Corporate Partner Classic Equine. These, in essence, fulfill the same function as traditional splint boots, which is to protect the splint and sesamoid areas and provide support to leg tendons. Though splint boots take their name from the protection they offer to the medial splint bone and the ligaments and tendons associated with it, they also serve to protect the inner side of the large cannon bone.

Splint boots wrap around the leg below the knee, at or above the ankle. They are among the most common and least expensive legwear for horses. In addition to providing protection for young horses in the process of basic training, splint boots





Reiners put leg protection to the test in every way imaginable. They test the limits of splint protection in crossover moves and spins at blistering speed. The quick changes in direction call for protection without sacrificing range of motion. The slides these horses perform are intense, and we know our Performance Skid Boots have to meet a high standard in protection, durability and value. Classic Equine is proud to have collaborated with top trainers in the NRHA to develop specialized protection for the unique demands they have of the products that protect their horses.

Classic Equine is proud to be the official equine leg protection of the NRHA.

David Irick
Director of Product Development
Equibrand (Classic Equine)



Classic Equine™ Polo Wraps are made of 500 gram fleece and come in a huge assortment of colors and patterns.

are a necessary accessory for horses that “interfere,” that is, strike their limbs with opposing limbs or hooves. The trauma that results from interference is a common cause of splints, which are hard, bony swellings that can take a horse out of training for weeks, even months. Splints tend to occur on the inside of the leg where hard contact with another limb is the most likely to occur. As the name implies, splint

boots are meant to absorb the force of such blows, thereby preventing injuries to the long, tapering splint bones, the cannon bone, and the associated ligaments, tendons and muscles.

To accomplish this, these all-purpose boots have a reinforced inner strike area. This shield is traditionally made of leather; however, today you’re equally likely to find splint boots with formed plastic inner plates coupled with synthetic materials that form the boot.

Both Vanlandingham and Fappani say they only keep their young horses in splint boots for a short while before switching to polo wraps. These are long, elasticized strips of material equivalent to the popular Ace bandages used to wrap strains and sprains in humans. The main reason both riders prefer the polo wraps over splint boots is the extra support they provide to ligaments and tendons.



Polo wraps come in mild-to-wild color and pattern variations to match a rider’s fashion sense while providing support to soft tissues and some protection from contact.



Professional’s Choice VenTECH™ Splint Boots have a contoured protective splint patch that provides extra protection to the splint bone.



Designed by Shawn Florida, the Classic Equine™ Safety Wrap is a sleek splint-type boot made to look great in the competition arena.

Reiners’ Resources

A HANDY GUIDE TO PRODUCTS AND COMPANIES MENTIONED IN THIS ARTICLE

OFFICIAL EQUINE LEG PROTECTION OF NRHA

Classic Equine, NRHA Corporate Partner: Classic Equine offers a complete variety of quality legwear that’s recommended by top NRHA professionals. Their products include DyNo Turn Bell boots, Classic Splint Boots, polo wraps, knee boots, skid boots, the Legacy line of leg boots, plus the Safety Wrap designed by the NRHA’s leading money earner, Shawn Florida. 800-654-7864, equibrand.com

OTHER RETAILERS

Back On Track: Maker of therapeutic equine, canine and human therapeutic products, including Therapeutic No-Bow Leg Wraps. 888-758-9836, backontrackproducts.com

Ice Horse®: Makers of cold therapy boots and wraps for equines, including the Evandura knee-to ankle wrap. Used and endorsed by NRHA Million Dollar Rider Tom McCutcheon. 800-786-6633, ice-horse.net

Professional’s Choice: Makers of a complete line of polo wraps, splint boots, skid boots, bell boots, and the original Sports Medicine boot. 800-331-9421, prochoice.com

Soft-Ride: Makers of specialty orthotic boots with gel soles reputed to reduce shock and vibrations on long trailer trips. 855.763.8743; International 281.334.2576, softrideboot.com

PREFERRED TACK RETAILERS

Pard’s Western Shop, NRHA Corporate Partner: offering a complete selection of top-quality leg protection from leading manufacturers, including Classic Equine, along with a full complement of saddles, bridles, accessories, western wear and more. 800-334-5726, pards.com

Kyle Tack, NRHA Corporate Partner: offering a select assortment of legwear, along with bridles, saddles, accessories, training equipment and more. 877-429-2116, kyletack.com

SmartPak, NRHA Corporate Partner: offering a select assortment of legwear, training equipment, and stable accessories. 800-461-8898, SmartPakEquine.com

A non pro, however, may keep his or her horses in splint boots as standard protective gear throughout their careers. These riders tend to prefer the ease of applying the splint boots, which fasten quickly using hook-and-loop fasteners or buckles, as compared with time spent properly wrapping the legs. Furthermore, some non pros shy away from polo wraps because improperly wrapped legs can lead to problems of their own. Poorly-applied wraps can pull ligaments and tendons out of proper alignment, leaving some to suggest that it's better to leave the legs bare than improperly wrap them. However, Vanlandingham believes that anyone can learn to correctly apply polo wraps.

"To me, you get better protection from polos compared to splint boots. They stay in place better and provide extra support to ligaments and tendons. People sometimes think it's hard to put them on correctly, but it's not rocket science," he says.

A non pro can certainly learn to use polo wraps correctly by consulting with an NRHA Professional, trainer or veterinarian. In just a few tries, a professional can teach the correct technique and the proper, even tension needed when applying wraps.

It's hard to see how a wrap can be as protective as a splint boot. The answer can be the use of additional padding located beneath the wrap. Vanlandingham uses quilt fabric to provide the added cushioning. This also makes the wraps nearly foolproof.

"When you have quilts under polo wraps, you can hardly screw up," he says. (Some wraps even come with the quilt backing already affixed to the elasticized outer material). "But if you're still not comfortable with polo wraps, go to a quick-wrap splint boot like those made by NRHA Corporate Partner Classic Equine."

Fappani also prefers polo wraps to boots of any kind, noting that he will use polo wraps on all four legs of most horses throughout the remainder of their training. He likes the wraps



Classic Equine™ No-Turn Bell Boots are easy to apply and they stay in place to protect horses that overreach.



Colorful bell boots by Professional's Choice can be color-coordinated with a rider's tack and apparel.



Cold therapy boots like the IceHorse Evendura can help reduce post-workout swelling.



Professional's Choice Ice Cells are a simple way to provide cold therapy to a horse's legs for injury treatment and after workouts.

because he can adjust the tension and support they bring to the lower leg. He said that wraps also do a better job of keeping dirt out in comparison to boots. He does make one exception to the rule: he'll use boots in the show ring.

"I like to show in boots because they present a clean look to the judges," he says.

Polo wraps, however, demand more upkeep than splint boots. Generally, polo wraps are made of woven fleece and must be laundered and dried completely before reuse. Vanlandingham keeps a washer and dryer in his stable to launder the wraps and other legwear used over the course of a typical day of training. For most non pros, having several sets of wraps for each horse and laundering them once a week will be necessary in order to always have a clean set ready for use.

Adding Bell Boots and Skid Boots

Once a horse learns the basic reining maneuvers and the trainers start building speed into their training, they begin to use more specialized leg equipment that includes bell boots, knee boots and skid boots. We'll look at each in turn.

Though they can still be seen in use, "old school" bell boots made of rubber slip over the hoofs and are shaped like bells, hence the name. (A variation is a similar rubber bell, but with hook-and-loop closures). Most riders today favor close-fitting, non-turning boots of synthetic materials that can be fastened quickly by hook-and-loop closures. The primary purpose of bell boots is to keep horses' front and rear hooves from colliding, a common occurrence when a horse overreaches. For this reason, bell boots may also be called overreach boots.

Overreaching occurs when a back hoof "grabs" the back of the front hoof, something that can happen during hard acceleration. Their main purpose is to protect the front heel bulbs. When

Boots with ice pockets serve as therapeutic aids, but can also be used post-workout to cool legs and reduce swelling.





Two-time NRHA Futurity Champion Andrea Fappani uses and endorses knee boots made by NRHA Corporate Partner Classic Equine™.

correctly fitted, the bell boot just touches the ground behind the bulbs of the front hoof while the horse is standing.

Skid boots protect the hide covering the bulbs of the hind feet and the pasterns. They were invented with reining horses in mind, though they're also commonly used by rodeo tie-down ropers who also ask their horses for a deep sliding stop. During the sliding stop, a horse is at risk of contacting the ground at the rear of the hoof and pastern.

Such contact can result in a friction burn. Skid boots provide a protective barrier that prevents this from occurring.

Vanlandingham keeps a pair of skid boots and overreach boots handy on his saddle while riding.

"Whenever I go to stop at speed, I will use skid boots on the back to keep my horses from burning themselves," he says. The overreach boots, which Vanlandingham uses sparingly, mainly help to keep the rear hoofs from clipping the front on run downs. He also sometimes uses them when training spins. His preference, he says, are leather skid boots made by Classic Equine.

"They stay in place and carry well on my saddle. I am comfortable with them," he concludes.

Fappani usually waits until his horses are in their futurity year before employing bell boots. He prefers neoprene to fitted boots of cordura or ballistic cloth because, he says, they stay in place better.

"As babies, the horses are not going fast enough to worry about them stepping on their feet. But by their 3-year-old year, they're moving fast enough that you need to worry about that."

As for skid boots, Fappani considers using them on a case-by-case basis.

"Some horses never need skid boots," he says. "It also depends on the ground. If it is hard, the skid boots go on right away."

However, Fappani keeps his home arena and track immaculately groomed, so the chances of getting burned heels is much lower. Still, as horses increase speed and their sliding stops lengthen, he usually slaps on skid boots. Notably, he only uses them during the period when he's actually practicing slides, removing them as soon as he is done to prevent any chafing by dirt and sand that invariably get underneath the fabric. Like Vanlandingham, Fappani prefers the more traditional leather skid boots (ones that protect the heel bulb with a leather cup, rather than plastic or nylon) because he feels they simply fit best.

Knee Boots

Fappani is well-known for advocating the use of a single knee boot for horses in training. He typically locates one on the left leg. Knee boots, as the name suggests, help protect the knees on the forelegs when impact occurs. This most commonly happens when practicing spins, but can also be a problem during turnaround and rollback training.

Fappani likes to use only one boot because he feels it provides sufficient protection without the bulk of having two knee boots in place. He does make exceptions for some horses, especially those that haven't yet learned to mind their legs and place their feet correctly. Flexibility is a key attribute of a good knee boot.

Cold Therapy Boots

More and more performance horse riders and trainers are ending work sessions by applying cold therapy boots to cool the leg and reduce any swelling. The practice began mostly on the English end of the arena, but has moved aggressively into the Western side in recent years.

Created specifically to treat horses with leg injuries that respond to cold therapy, they're now as popular for use preventatively according to Julie Garella, owner of IceHorse. Some models use ice, either crushed or cubed and stuffed into pockets. A problem with these is that you need a supply of ice (some trainers even have ice machines in their barns). Furthermore, ice melt can flow onto hoofs and upset proper moisture balance.

IceHorse and others offer products that can be frozen and applied without the fuss. The IceHorse's "First+Ice®" filling mimics those that are often used in hospital cold packs and has the consistency of fluffy snow rather than the non-yielding stiffness of ice. It cools for up to two hours. Professional's Choice takes a different approach, using freezable "ice cells" that fit inside their Sports Medicine boots.

On The Road

When it comes to hauling horses, Vanlandingham is a minimalist; he seldom puts anything on his horses' legs.

"Wraps and shipping boots heat their legs up, which is something I worry about. I have never had a horse kick another underneath the stall and damage a leg. It could happen, but I think it is safer than having the horse get hot."

To cushion the horses' legs, Vanlandingham relies on his trailer's stall mats and the liberal application of stall shavings to reduce road shock. But he says on long hauls, he recommends a product called Soft-Ride boots, which are cushioned orthotic boots designed to reduce fatigue and absorb shock. Think of Crocs for horses and you get the basic concept.

Another product to consider is the "No Bow" Therapeutic Quick Wrap made by Back On Track®. These equine leg wraps are widely used by English riders for long road trips and are beginning to catch on among western riders, too. These cotton/polyester wraps infused with ceramic are said to decrease swelling in the legs and reduce wind puffs. ♦



In addition to reducing swelling, Back On Track's Therapeutic Quick Wrap can be used for shipping support.