

Safekeeping Blanketing Safe is Comfy

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People regularly adjust horse blankets without understanding the impact on the horse. You want the horse to feel confident, safe and relaxed, and that begins with daily comfort. So, here are rules to live by when blanketing your horse:

DRESSING for Life

- **ON: Front to Back.** Always start the blanketing process at the horse's chest. Finish with the leg straps. This minimizes serious injuries. You don't want the sheet to slide back and the surcingle to tighten around the flank to become a bucking strap (see sidebar).

- **OFF: Back to Front.** To undress the horse, start at the leg straps and work forward to the chest. You'd hate to forget the straps between the legs and pull. A violent panic could ensue.

FITTING for Suppleness

- **Slack the Chest.** When horses lie down, their shoulders lift. Blankets also slide. Why not leave room for the sheet or blanket to slip into a comfortable spot? Otherwise, the horse stands in cramped pressure, making him sore. Put clothes on with lots of slack and slide them back, leaving a fat fist between the sheet and chest. Loose in the chest is good.

- **One Buckle.** Attaching only one chest buckle will reduce shoulder rubs and allow the horse to be more supple. Carefully check stitching frequently. Fix or tighten promptly. You don't ever want the front fastener to break (or, again, the sheet can become a bucking strap).

- **Fist Surcingles.** The blanket's surcingles should hang about five inches below the horse's barrel. I always make sure a good-sized fist width fits between the belly and surcingle.

- **Suspend Leg Straps.** If a horse lies down and his hock gets caught in the slack of a strap, he'll panic, scramble and likely get hurt. Don't attach the straps across the diagonal, nor simply attach them to the same side. Instead, snap them to the same side, looped through the other strap. This way, straps hang suspended between the legs rather than drooping with dangerous slack or pressing on the legs. Be sure to adjust the length to suspend the cross above the hocks for safety.

MOVING blankets

- **Don't Pull.** If you want to reposition a blanket or sheet, do not pull it over or forward. These actions pull hair back and hurt. That is why horses try to bite you when you fuss with their clothes.



PHOTO: LUCIA RITTENHOUSE

Pass leg straps through each other to suspend between this position and four inches above the hocks.



PHOTO: NOBLE HILL FARM

Surcingles should hang loose. I measure the distance with a big closed fist, about five to six inches.



PHOTO: LUCIA RITTENHOUSE

Leave plenty of room at the chest.

- **Lift to Move.** Reposition blankets forward by first undoing leg straps, then grabbing the blanket just above the tail and folding the fabric forward to the withers. Now that the clothes are halved, use one hand at

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the withers and the other at the fold to lift the clothes to move them. That is: elevate all the cloth and hold it up as you straighten the clothes and move them up and toward the chest. Next, gently slide the blanket back, leaving about five

Avoid Bucking Straps

Bucking straps are tightened around a bronco's flank. They tickle so bad [read: hurt] that the horse goes mad to escape. Clothing handled carelessly can create bucking straps. There is no warning. The surcingle slides slightly and tightens around the barrel. Horses trying to escape the sensation have been known to run through barn walls, through tied down flaps and even drown in a pool. Never undo the chest without undoing the surcingles first. That goes for braiders, too. ♦

inches of space between the chest and clothes. This gives the horse shoulder room to lie down comfortably and reduces times the blanket needs to be adjusted. Don't forget to finish with the leg straps.

LEADING through Doors

- **Open the Door.** Be SURE any door is open ALL THE WAY before walking through it.
- **Close the Latch.** Always, always make sure latches are pulled back. Otherwise, they can catch a surcingle, causing at best a rip to the blanket and at worse injury to horse and/or handler.

- **Wait.** Half halt before crossing the threshold. Get the horse back to you and paying attention before passing through any door or gate. Thresholds are not the place to rush. The horse will catch himself.
- **Turn Right.** Enter the stall to the back and turn to the right. Otherwise, the horse can catch his hip and get ripped open for no good reason.

There's nothing like safe, relaxing time and a good night's sleep! So, make your horse's day by following these blanketing rules. Horses will love you for it! ■

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About the author: The lack of effective and healthy grooming products inspired Ruthann Smith, world-class groom and braider, to develop the economical Lucky Braids™ solutions: All-In-One Shampoo, Whitener/ Dry Wash enzymatic spray, Handy Salve and Braiding DVD/Tool prized by top horsemen. For more grooming tips, please join at: LuckyBraids.com.

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