

Trilogy Tips

Three Simple Steps to Creating a Happier Horse Before Leaving the Mounting Block

Having the opportunity to watch hundreds of grooms, amateurs, and professionals tack up their horses, a few things have become apparent that you may want to keep in mind for your own program. As a saddle fitter, you often get to experience horses that become cranky and miserable during the saddling and mounting process. People regularly think a horse has a bad attitude, or their saddle doesn't fit, and sometimes that is true. But it can also be an indication that some of the horse's pre-riding routine may need attention. Here is a short list of tips that may help your situation with your horse to improve, sometimes dramatically!

1. Saddling

Saddling and unsaddling seems obvious, doesn't it? Well, it isn't always. Consider that horses appreciate someone that is thoughtful- not abrupt, or rough- when being handled and saddled. We should be lifting the saddle high enough that it clears the horse's back. Then, while your left hand is gripping the leg (the front of the saddle at the bottom of the block), and your right hand is under the panel, move it over the horse's back. Keeping it up off the horse's back, center the saddle. Allow them to become calm before gently lowering into position.



When removing the saddle, do the reverse. With your left hand wrapped around the leg and your right hand supporting the panel, push up so the saddle clears the withers and back. Avoid the friction and discomfort that occurs from dragging the saddle across the thoracic area of the spine, which consists of the entire saddle position and withers.

I just recently worked on a horse that was notorious for being "unhappy" during saddling. After saddling and unsaddling several times, she knew we were being respectful and did not make a face or move around in the cross ties. Practicing these methods creates a much happier saddling experience, and horse!

2. Girthing

We recommend, while in the cross ties, you only girth enough to keep the saddle in place. As you and your horse leave the cross ties, alternate girthing on the left and right sides. If your horse is quite demonstrative with girthing, walk forward and repeat a few times to minimize your horse's reactions. Check your girth before getting to the mounting block. Not all horses will tolerate having their girth tightened at the mounting block, then the rider climbing on. Many sensitive horses will buck you off for it.

If your saddle tends to slip left or right, tighten last the side opposite of where it slips, and tighten that side the most. Your horse is likely asymmetrical. Grounding the saddle to the low side only guarantees the saddle and ride will stay on the low side. Then your horse will get sore on the low side, and around the spine on the opposite side, from the saddle shifting.

Your girth sizing, fit, and stretchiness are also key pieces to comfort. The top of the girth should end approximately a hands-width below the saddle pad. This way, the buckles will be in a more comfortable part of the horse's body. Roller buckles are a must, but careful with the elastic. If you can easily stretch the elastic, you will find your saddle less stable, resulting in your girth flexing and creating friction.

Another consideration, with all the different shaped girths on the market, is to stick your hand under the sides of the girth and between the front legs to determine how the pressure is distributed. You will sometimes notice when feeling between the front legs, the only pressure you feel is a thin band across the back of the girth, and the rest is not making contact. This is not something that will make your horse a willing partner!

3. Mounting

Almost everyone uses a mounting block these days to save the wear a tear on your horse's withers and back. What is fascinating, and often cringeworthy, is how riders land when mounting. If rider after rider throws their leg over and lands on the horse's back like a 150-lb sack of potatoes, it is enough to make any horse resentful and reactive. To be happy, some cold-backed horses even need for the rider to walk away from the mounting block before sitting.

I worked with a 95-lb woman who was notorious for landing hard in the saddle. She created a problem with her new horse where when she mounted, he would bolt from the mounting block. He was 16.2 hands and a solid-bodied horse. We talked about her mounting technique during her saddle fitting, and seven days later she called me back because of his improved behavior. She thought it was her saddle! She did several mounts and dismounts with treats, and he remembered it was ok to stand quietly while she gently mounts.

Many a horse and rider combination has been ruined during the mounting process. Catch yourself with your thighs, use your other hand to support you, and sit gently. Some need to walk away before you fully sit. Plan: do you need someone to hold your horse as you mount? Do you need to have treats in your pocket? Create expectations for your horse of a gentle, no stress mounting followed by a treat!



It is truly exciting to see how paying attention to these details can turn a horse's attitude around in no time. Create positive expectations for your horse!

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