

TACK TALK

- ❑ *Clean and condition a saddle, bridle, and girth, knowing reasons for each step.*
- ❑ *Reassemble saddle and bridle without assistance.*

OBJECTIVE: How often do you clean your tack? How often do you wish you had a barn full of working students to clean your tack for you? Caring for all of the leather in your barn can be a BIG job. If you want your students to help with this task, either by wiping down tack after each ride or participating in a thorough deep cleaning, you'll need them to be well-trained. Quality tack is too expensive to sacrifice!

At HorseSense, we encourage upper-level students to wipe down sweaty or slobbery tack after a ride, and to participate in a weekly cleaning session. Once a month, everything gets taken apart for a thorough inspection and deep conditioning. In order for students to be helpful participants, we need to feel confident that **they will get the leather really clean**; that they **know how to select and use appropriate tack-cleaning products**; and that **they can reassemble the tack independently** - even complicated bits and bridles!

CHECKING IT OFF: You're going to need to create a lot of practice time for this topic - luckily, there is rarely a shortage of dirty tack! Students can generally pass the tack cleaning requirement in one or two sessions, but we like to emphasize the second half of this objective by asking them to explain each step of their process.

Reassembly can be a whole different ball game. Many students find this to be the most difficult checkmark to earn in Yellow Level, especially when working with puzzling pieces of tack such as full-cheek keepers, figure-eight nosebands, or safety stirrups. Encourage them to stick with it until they can put a saddle and bridle together consistently **without** you having to go behind them and make corrections.

You'll know they've got it: if you feel comfortable handing over your saddle, bridle and/or girth, knowing that it will be returned to you cleaned, conditioned and correctly assembled.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

"How often do you clean your tack? Do you think the leather is in good condition?"

"How would you feel if your horse's face got rubbed raw by his dirty bridle?"

"How much do you think this bridle costs? This saddle? These simple stirrup leathers? How can regularly cleaning and oiling your tack save you money?"

"How can you tell on which hole the cheekpieces need to be fastened when you're putting your bridle together? How can guessing wrong cause your horse discomfort?"

YOUR LIFE
COULD
DEPEND ON
THIS LEATHER!

KEEP IT CLEAN

Ask ten horsemen to tell you the right way to clean tack and undoubtedly, you're going to get ten different answers. While we suggest **establishing a few general rules**, such as *clean before you condition* and *use as little water as possible*, there's a lot of room for you to explain the reasoning behind your preferred method of tack cleaning.

As you go, make sure to explain that "tack cleaning" can mean anything from:

- 🐾 **The quick wipe.** Truly virtuous riders stay in the habit of doing this after every ride. Most wipe-downs involve rinsing the slobbery bit and giving leather straps a once-over with a damp rag or saddle soap sponge.
- 🐾 **The compromise cleaning.** This might involve wiping off all sweat and gunk, light conditioning, and/or an application of saddle soap, with the saddle and bridle still assembled. Don't forget to show your students the trick of temporarily letting buckles down a few holes to wipe away metal deposits.
- 🐾 **The deep clean and condition.** Everything gets taken apart for a careful inspection (how's your stitching holding up?) and oiling or deep conditioning.



No matter how much time is invested, **the tack should actually get clean.** Emphasize that leaving sweat, hair or dirt on the leather in the present only causes extra work in the future. A few tips for increasing motivation:

- 🐾 **Award a prize for the biggest tack transformation.** Take before and after photos and share in your barn's newsletter and social media pages.
- 🐾 **Tell your students to think of tack cleaning like stall cleaning:** a few pieces of leftover poop don't seem like a big deal, until you have to lay down in the stall! **ASK:** *Would you be willing to put this freshly-cleaned bit in your mouth?*
- 🐾 **Have students guess the value of the tack used on their lesson horse.** If they are non-owners or new to riding, they may experience some serious sticker shock - and will understand your desire to make the leather last!

COMPARISON SHOPPING

In addition to teaching students how to clean tack, you're also going to have to **help them navigate the wide world of tack cleaning products.** Let's face it, the term "saddle soap" alone can be incredibly confusing.

Pull together every product you own and **help students sort them into categories: cleaners, one-step products, conditioners, and glycerine-based sealants.** There's going to be some overlap, so make sure to teach students how to judge which product they need, based on the extent of their tack cleaning project. Test comprehension by sending them on a **tack catalog scavenger hunt**, asking them to circle the products they would use in different situations.



Cleans and conditions in one easy step!*

*Terms and conditions apply.

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

Do you remember your first attempt at putting together a halter or bridle? Even experienced equestrians can be humbled by a bundle of freshly cleaned straps.

We've been teaching children and adults to assemble tack for fifteen years and it is always an adventure. Here are a few strategies we've developed along the way:

- 🐾 **Make sure they know parts of the saddle and bridle first.** This seems obvious, but if it's been a while since they earned their credit for Red Level tack identification, they may struggle to tell their crownpieces from their browbands. Keep in mind that some pieces, like nosebands, look different when the bridle is disassembled!
- 🐾 **A demonstration is worth a thousand words.** Do this slowly, with a simple bridle *and* a more complicated one if possible.
- 🐾 **Teach memorable tips.** The devil's in the details when it comes to assembling tack. There are probably a lot of little points you take for granted, such as *smooth side up* and *studs in/buckles out*. Teach students to *turn the bit into a taco* and that *peacocks look forward*. On an English bridle, the *long sides stay together* (long noseband strap is on the right, as is the throatlatch) and on the saddle, the *billet straps are shy* so must hide under the buckle guards. Use your imagination, especially for complicated pieces such as crank or figure-eight nosebands.
- 🐾 **Create an order of operations.** We find that nosebands create confusion, so we like to put them on last, after the bit and bridle have been successfully joined. Slotting the browband onto the crownpiece can be a good starting point, or you can have students start by connecting bit, reins and cheekpieces and work up to the top of the bridle. Whatever order you choose, stick with it to help students create a routine for their assembly!



- 🐾 **Play horse.** Have students place the bridle on top of their heads for reassembly. The horse's eye view helps all the pieces end up in the right place; encourage students to work in pairs and take turns wearing the bridle.
- 🐾 **Create an assembly line.** Practice makes perfect, and nothing helps a student remember how to thread a noseband like doing ten of them in a row.
- 🐾 **Donate tack to the cause.** A practice bridle can be sent home with responsible students in pieces, and brought back fully assembled the next week. This allows students plenty of low-pressure time to practice trial and error and repeat the process as many times as they like. At HorseSense, we also have an old saddle outfitted with peacock stirrups that can serve a similar purpose.
- 🐾 **Leave school tack in pieces for students to reassemble before a lesson.** Use this trick sparingly, and only with students you know are already proficient at assembly. You can warn students ahead of time or let it be a surprise. Nothing as motivating as knowing that you can't ride until the stirrups or bridle are put together correctly!



On a rainy day... disassemble all your bridles, halters and stirrups and create a giant mountain of tack. In order to make the mountain disappear, students must learn to spot the difference, correctly identifying and matching each piece before assembling. Differentiating between three full-cheek snaffles or twenty cheekpieces is no easy task - this lesson will easily fill an hour!

PARTY TIME

Tack cleaning parties are a barn staple for a good reason. The leather gets clean, friendships are formed, and your barn family grows. The trick is to embrace the party spirit and make these work sessions lots of fun!



Ensure that you are well-stocked on cleaning supplies, including plenty of rags and plain hand soap for oily fingers. Schedule your party on a day when all of the tack is available and you have several hours to devote to the project. Start with a quick demonstration so everyone gets a refresher on the cleaning process, and create stations to avoid a dozen hands all grabbing for the saddle soap at once.

Depending on the length and location of the party, play music or put on a movie. Your students may also enjoy you cleaning along with them and swapping horse stories - or **Stuff Happens cards**. (horsesenselearninglevels.com/resource-center/challenges/stuff-happens/) They'll love hearing about the time you fell off at a big show! Order pizza or provide snacks, and if weather permits, reward students with a bareback ride or an unmounted pony play session in the arena.

Creating a supportive, no-drama community is one of the best things you can do for your horse business.

Read more ideas for helping your barn family become bigger and better on the Boss Mare blog:

<https://horsesenselearninglevels.com/how-to-build-a-barn-family/>

OFF TO THE RACES

Another tradition worth including in your tack lessons is **bridle assembly races**. You can run these at the end of a cleaning party, as part of a camp session, or in a rainy day barn lesson - and with a little imagination, you can keep your students challenged and entertained even if they've been putting your bridles together for years!

We like to pair students up for these races whenever possible. If you have a group of mixed ability, give lower-level students the easiest pieces of tack - such as snaffle bridles with no noseband - and give upper-level students all your bit loops and auxiliary nosebands, or the stiff new bridle with the keepers sewn just a little too tight.

Try running races with varying degrees of difficulty:

- 🐾 **Single bridle as a team.** Consider swapping tack so each team assembles a bridle they aren't familiar with.
- 🐾 **Multiple bridles as a team.** Excellent teamwork is essential!
- 🐾 **The complete set.** Teams must assemble a saddle, bridle and halter.
- 🐾 **Blindfolded as a team or individuals.** Make sure to keep plenty of room between contestants to avoid mix-ups.

Run these races along with a stall mucking contest, arena races on foot, and/or mounted games, and award prizes. Schedule the festivities on the same day as the Kentucky Derby or Breeder's Cup and watch the races together.

