

Horse Tack: The Basics



If riding is a part of your horse ownership goal, you'll need a few basic pieces of tack. Horse tack can get very specialized, and it can feel overwhelming to know what you need. Here's a list of the basic tack that can get you mounted up and down the rail or riding in an arena.

Basic horse tack:

- Halter
- Lead rope
- Saddle
- Breast collar
- Saddle pad
- Bridle

Halter and lead rope

The first piece of tack any horse owner needs is a **halter and lead** rope for handling the horse. **Halters** are made from various materials, including leather, nylon, or rope. In addition to helping control a horse for grooming, saddling, farrier, and veterinarian visits, halters are a training tool to teach a horse to respond to pressure on their face and to respect a handler's personal space. It should fit snugly but not pinch or create pressure points.

On average, lead ropes are 9 – 12 feet long and are commonly made from braided rope, poly, cotton, and leather. A heavy-duty snap secures the lead to the halter. Some leads have a brass chain that can be placed over the horse's nose or under his chin. These should only be used if you have experience handling horses, as they can quickly make a horse head shy or pose a risk for injury when misused.

Saddle

The primary purpose of any saddle is to provide riders support while on the horse's back. **English** and **Western** disciplines have general-purpose saddles and event-specific saddles made with design features tailored to a particular riding style.

What is a girth

A girth is like a belt and is typically neoprene, cotton, nylon webbing, or leather. Fleece or sheepskin-lined girths are also available. The girth holds the saddle in place on the horse's back and, when tightened, rests just behind the horse's elbow.

The difference between English-style and western-style girths

An **English-style girth** has two buckles on each side of the saddle, whereas **western-style girths** use a single cinch strap to secure the girth on both sides.

Breast collar

The breast collar is another piece of tack that helps your saddle stay in place. Most **breast collars** are three-piece T-styles, though there are other designs. The two pieces that form the top part of the "T" are attached to each side of the saddle. The third piece runs between the horse's front legs and connects it to the girth with a strap or clip.

Saddle pad

Saddle pads go between the horse's back and the saddle. They help keep the bottom of your saddle clean and reduce friction and pressure on the horse's back during riding.

A **bareback pad** has a girth like a saddle but none of the other rigging or structure, so you can feel like you're riding directly on your horse's back. Some models even include stirrups. These lightweight pads keep your pants clean and offer an added sense of security when riding without a saddle.



Bridle

The bridle describes several pieces of tack used together. It is worn on the horse's head and is used to direct the horse while riding.

Parts of a bridle

These are the four parts to a bridle: the headstall, bit, reins and curb chain/strap.

Headstall

Made of leather or synthetic materials, it includes buckles to fit it to your horse's head. English and Dressage bridles are all similar in style. They have multiple cheek pieces, a noseband, and a browband. Some may include a cavesson.

Western headstalls have a singular cheek piece adjustable on both sides of the head and can come in many different styles, including a browband and a single or double ear setup. Silver accents, rhinestones, engraved buckles and conchos, and bright colors allow western riders to match their tack to their fashion style.

Bit

Both **English** and **Western** headstalls attach to a metal bit. There are easily hundreds, if not thousands, of bit choices. The bit sits over the horse's tongue, fitting between his incisor and pre-molar teeth.

Bit categories

Bits fall into three broad categories: snaffles, curbs, and combinations.

The snaffle bit has a “broken,” moveable mouthpiece to put pressure on the tongue and mouth. These are commonly used in English disciplines and to train young horses.

The curb bit has a solid mouth piece that may be curved or flat and shanks that hang down out of the horse’s mouth, creating a leverage action that puts pressure on the mouth, chin, and poll.

Combination bits include joints and shanks designed to combine the function of the snaffle and curb bits.

Bitless bridles include a headstall and reins but not a bit and function through pressure on the horse’s face. Your preferred riding style and horse’s training level determine which bit is the right option.

Reins

The reins attach to the bit and create a line of communication with the horse through his mouth. In western disciplines, riders can choose between **two individual reins** called split reins or a looped rein. English-style disciplines always used a **looped rein** with a buckle in the middle.

Curb chain/strap

Made from leather, synthetic, or chain, a **curb chain** or strap is attached to each side of the bit so that the strap follows the shape of the horse’s chin. On snaffle bits, the strap is used as a safety device to prevent the horse from pulling the bit through his mouth. On curb bits, a **curb chain or strap** creates another point of contact with the horse and can aid in training.

More horse tack tips



It's Show Time: Essential Gear You Need for the Horse Show

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