

## Taking care of your BALANCE saddle.

*By Kate Ranson.*

We were careful to put plenty of information for our clients into the Manual that accompanies every new BALANCE saddle. The care and conditioning of the saddle is something that we include because we appreciate that a well made saddle is a considerable investment and so it makes sense to care for it in a way that helps it to provide many years of good service.



However, it is not unusual for us to see saddles that have only been in use for a few months, looking old, dry and scruffy. By contrast we also see BALANCE saddles that are 10yrs plus in age.....looking wonderful with rich, mellow and supple leathers. So, what is it that makes the difference? Well, simply put...the amount of care and effort that goes into its cleaning and conditioning.

Most saddles work pretty hard and can be subjected to all manner of influences in addition to the general wear and stresses caused by riding. These influenced include: rain, snow, sun, dust, mud, sand, sweat and the odd bit of slobber!

Leather, much like skin, handles all this more effectively and with minimal damage if it is cleaned and conditioned regularly. This keeps the leather soft and supple and protects it from the elements.



Riders of an older generation will often look wistfully into the distance when talking about saddles they knew in the past. They will say things like.....Oh I remember the first saddle I had. It was made for my great, great grandfather and went through the war blah, blah, blah..... The leather was still as good as new and all I had to do to clean it was to show it a wet sponge once a year!

Well, in addition to the fact that we sometimes have a rather rose tinted way of remembering things from our youth.....there is no doubt that leathers that were available to the saddle industry 50 years ago were probably more resilient and more tolerant to abuse and neglect. The way that leathers were tanned in those days involved some pretty nasty chemicals and methods that are simply not allowed now. Despite many innovations in the leather industry, the modern vegetable based dyes and the more eco-friendly methods of tanning, mean that the leathers demand better care to get the best from them, so it might give the impression that they are inferior to leathers found in very old saddles.

The other factor is that many years ago, people used very simple products to condition and clean their leather and assumed that some time was needed to do the job well. Here we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century



where most people want instant results with little effort and are therefore, drawn to products that will do a good job at making the leather look shiny and clean but often at a cost in terms of the actual long term condition of the saddle. Many modern products contain some form of petro-chemicals which literally break down the connections between the individual leather fibres. Once broken down, the leather will lose moisture and also lose its colour more quickly, so it pays to check the labels on your leather care products. Stick to natural oils, waxes and fats.

I have used an example of a saddle that came to the office recently. It was not an old saddle, but looked pale and scruffy because the leather was dry.

I cleaned and conditioned the saddle in the same way I take care of my own saddles. The method is described further on in this article, and I hope you can see the benefits of taking care of a saddle in this way from the before and after photo's below. This was just with one session and I know that if I was using this saddle and cleaning it regularly, it would improve still more.

It's doesn't take a genius to work out how much longer this saddle is likely to last now that it is being cared for, when compared to the dry and rather sad state it arrived in.

The saddle when it arrived.



After Cleaning and Conditioning!





After taking this saddle through a process that I was taught many years ago, it occurred to me that many people have never been told how to clean a saddle properly, so I am sitting here, wearing my Pony Club tie and my BHS badge, while I get ready to share my saddle cleaning tips with you!

You will need.....

1. Bowl of warm (tepid) water with a few drops of very mild washing up liquid in it.
2. 1 cloth (a cotton face flannel is perfect) for removing dirt, grease and sweat.
3. A 1" paintbrush if applying oil.
4. A small sponge
5. Towel to remove excess oil and buff up surface of leather as desired.
6. Leather Conditioners that do not contain any petrochemicals such as, Pure Neatsfoot Oil if you can get it and Glycerine saddle soap or a thicker, waxy leather balm like Sedgewicks Leather Care or similar.
7. Large cup or tea, alcoholic beverage and some good music (optional!)

### **Step one. Cleaning the dirt from the surfaces of the leather.**

Remove all the pads, breastplate, girth and stirrups from the saddle.

Dampen your cloth in tepid water that has a couple of drops of a mild dishwashing liquid in it, then wring out all excess water. Wipe the saddle over removing dust and dirt paying close attention to the greasy build up that tends to occur on the flaps of the saddle. You may need to gently work at these areas by softening the grease and using your thumb nail.

You can also wipe the grease and dirt from the stirrup bars and if you take some sticky tape you can remove all the random hairs from the Velcro to which the knee blocks attach. Make sure that all the dirt and dust is removed from the saddle and towel off any excess wetness on the leather.

This is also a good time to take the opportunity to check the stitching on your saddle - particularly on the girth straps.

If you don't need to do a Deep Conditioning you can go straight to **Step 3** to finish cleaning your saddle.

### **Step two. Deep Conditioning the leather (to be done occasionally).**

OK, now your saddle is clean, dry and free from grease and dust it is time to condition the leather.

My preference (when the saddle needs a deep treatment) is to first of all treat the whole saddle with something like pure Neatsfoot oil. There are other oils on the market but you must be sure that they do not contain petro-chemical,

derived ingredients, mineral oils or silicone! You can use a soft cloth to apply this, but a clean paintbrush, kept for this job can make life easier, particularly when trying to reach nooks and crannies. Pay close attention to the underside of the flaps and the girth straps as these are areas that tend to get dry. The frequency of when you will need to do a deep conditioning will depend on the conditions you keep/use your saddle in. Again it is useful to think about your skin. If you live in a very dry and or hot climate, you will probably need to condition more often than those of you who live in less extreme weather conditions. However, one should not need to or attempt to, oil the saddle more than once every couple of weeks otherwise you can end up with the leather becoming limp and soggy, which can actually weaken it. Leave the saddle for 20 minutes and then wipe away any oil left on the surfaces.

**IMPORTANT** Oils will soak into and through the leather fibres really fast and therefore make it feel supple quite quickly. However this same property can pull some of the important fats in the hide towards its centre and leave the surface more vulnerable to drying and damage. Therefore, it is essential that you follow up the use of a light and easily absorbed oil, with something that is more fatty/waxy and will stay on, or close to, the surface of the leather.

Therefore, any time you apply oil to your saddle you must follow this with step 3 with a product that will stay on/close to the surface of the leather to seal and protect it. A good, natural leather care balm or good old reliable Glycerine Saddle Soap (the solid type available in a bar or tub) are important to have in your tack cleaning kit.

### **Step 3 Sealing and conditioning the surface of the leather to be done at least once a week and preferably every time you use the saddle.**

I prefer Glycerine Saddle 'Soap' most of the time used in the following way: Take a bar or pot of Glycerine saddle soap and an almost dry sponge. This may seem a little gross, but the best way to get the right amount and consistency of saddle soap onto the sponge is to "spit" on the soap and then rub the sponge on it. (This isn't just me being revolting but is an old English tradition passed down through the Pony Club!) If the whole spitting thing is just too much for you then literally dab the tip of your sponge in water so it is barely damp and then rub it in to the saddle soap. The soap should not froth or foam but should be rubbed into the leather easily and leave a shiny finish. If you get a lot of foam on your sponge, it is too wet.

There is no need to buff or rub it off again but just leave the saddle to absorb all the goodness you have treated it to. It should have a very slightly tacky feel once it is finished.

Having cleaned your saddle well, make sure you store it away from direct sunlight and preferably with its saddle cover on top. Do not let sweaty and dirty girths lie over the seat of your saddle and do not store heavy items (rugs, other saddles etc.) on top of your saddle!

### **Cleaning and Conditioning Products.**

If Pure Neatsfoot oil and solid Glycerine saddle soap are not readily available to you or you prefer a more straight forward solution, then you can use something like Sedgewick's Leather Care or Efal Effax which are both natural products and do not contain the petrochemical derived ingredients, that will leach out colour and will dry the leather.

The BALANCE office stocks [Sedgwick's Leather-Care](#) because it is so good. It is actually made by a company in England who produce beautiful leathers for the saddle industry. They were concerned by the harsh chemical based leather cleaners and so called, 'conditioners' that are on the market and so started to supply pots of their own leather-care that they know will do a good job. The ingredients are very simple and natural. They are the same ingredients that are used to dress the tanned hides (currying) in preparation for use, so are very sympathetic to the leather structure. For more information you can go to their website [original-leathercare](#)

I find it easiest to "massage" these types of products into the leather so that every part of your saddle is treated. If you have a saddle that has a print on the surface of the leather you need to work the treatment into these crevices and this can be hard to do if the conditioner is very cold because the natural fats become very thick! Better to keep your pot in a warm place.

A quick version of Steps 1 and 3 is all that is needed most of the time, if you get into the habit of cleaning your tack after every time you use it. So it needn't eat into your riding and horse-care time.

### **Extra Tips**

- 🕒 If your saddle ever gets completely soaked in the rain, it will often look pale in colour. Do not be tempted to speed up the drying process by putting your saddle next to a source of heat. Instead, make sure you allow it to dry naturally in a warm and dry atmosphere, even if this takes a couple of days and then do the deep conditioning and cleaning process. If you ride in a saddle that is soaking wet, your weight will tend to stretch the leathers in the seat which, if not allowed to dry properly and tighten again, could lead to permanent wrinkles in the seat leather.
- 🕒 The same rules of cleaning apply to all of your tack, and it is important to keep your horse comfortable by making sure that his bridle, girth and breastplate are supple and clean and that the saddle pads are also washed/cleaned on a regular basis to avoid a build up of sweat, dirt and hair. (More details on taking care of your Saddle Pads to come in a separate article)
- 🕒 Get into the habit of rinsing the horse's bit in clean water as soon as you remove the bridle every time you ride, so that it is clean the next time you ask him to accept it into his mouth!

END

PS. Wearing a Pony Club Tie during the cleaning process is optional!