

Stirrups – What's Most Important?

Stirrups are not the most exciting tack purchase and so rarely receive more than a fleeting thought. Until that is, one of three things happen: we have a fall; we suffer from a knee injury or we buy a new saddle. Having recently experienced all three events here are some reflections that are obvious but worth remembering!

Safety! Safety! Safety!

It might be boring but safety must come first when riding our horses, no matter how experienced the rider or how obedient the horse. When it comes to safety, stirrups really are a rider's 'best friend'.

Yesterday I observed an experienced rider with over 32 years under his belt take a tumble while mounting. The result included the rider hitting the concrete floor and 600 kilo of horse stepped onto his hand! In this story the rider was lucky and nothing was broken!

What role did the stirrup play? Imagine the situation if the rider's foot had not quickly and easily slipped out and the rider had been trapped between the fixed mounting block and the horse, or dragged across the floor? This got me thinking about my own stirrups...

I school in a black dressage saddle with very lightweight stirrups. I have even gone a step further to assist my riding skills by choosing stirrups with a serrated grip on the foot bar. Today, I'm looking at these stirrups with a new perspective. It may help me keep my foot and lower leg still to have the serrated cover, but in the event of a fall, my foot would definitely NOT slip out as quickly and easily as I might needed. (Indeed the point of the stirrup is to AVOID foot movement!). I wonder when my brain switched off from being safety focused in favour of a possible extra dressage mark!



There is an additional problem with light weight stirrups, namely if you lose one at speed (e.g when playing Polo or Eventing) the lack of weight prevents it complying with the laws of gravity. Instead of hanging down ready for you to re-insert your foot as quickly as possible - it swings around wildly, and compounds to the stress and possible speed, in the situation.

As a coach specialising in the *Mind Factor*™ I try to promote the importance of knowing that you can rely on your tack to do its job when you need it most. This is an important factor in building rider confidence.

Another factor that contributes to confidence in the saddle is having the knowledge that you can ride 'pain free'. I recently had a reminder of this important lesson when I took up Endurance riding. This was a new discipline for both my horse and me. After following an extensive fitness campaign we were ready and I submitted our first entry.

Everything went well until we hit the 25 kilometre point. Then the pain that engulfed my right knee was unbearable. Tears streamed down my face as I pushed on convinced I could ride through the pain! Years earlier I had torn that knee ligament in a skiing accident. I believed it had repaired. I was wrong and had 'under prepared'!

In order to continue to compete in Endurance I searched for stirrups that would help absorb some of the concussion and provide my knee with enough relief during the 46 kilometre rides.

The benefits of my research were life changing! I experimented with different stirrup hinges including spring loaded stirrups of different levels of 'spring', and found each one offered me some level of relief.

I finally settled for the bungee stirrup and put aside my issues with looking like John Wayne in favour of pain free competing!

We successfully competed for three seasons winning many Grade 1 rosettes and an upgrade to the next class.

Finally onto our third situation – buying a new saddle! Having just ordered a new dressage saddle and spent hours with the fitter, trying different styles and widths on the horse, the order was placed. In my experience, this is a critical moment: some saddle fitters will either show very little interest in the stirrup selection or tend to make assumptions that you will order what they recommend and lead the witness to the 'standard' selection or the current latest "must have"! Neither of which may be in the rider's interest and "latest" doesn't always mean "safest".

I recommend you spell out for the saddle fitter what your riding level is, and your performance requirements from the tack. Tell them that confidence and tack reliability is critical! (You may need to remind them that any help our tack can give in the competition arena is greatly received but NOT at the expense of safety). See how he/she responds and what advice they offer. If you don't feel listened to, or sense you are being sold the 'quick easy sale' call a 'time out' and tell them you'll sleep on it! Saddles usually take a few weeks to arrive so that gives you plenty of time to shop around for stirrups – you'll be amazed at what you can find!

"The weight of tack is important and 'light is good' especially when Eventing, but if a few extra pounds in the stirrups makes the difference between winning or not ... something is wrong!"

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