

*A brief introduction to*

**horses & western riding**





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# What is Western Riding?

There are countless styles of horseback riding to be found all across the world. From the Samurai of feudal Japan to the nomads of the Mongolian Steppe, every culture that has been in contact with horses has created its own unique and specialized approach to training, saddling and controlling their animals.

When it comes to international competitions like the Olympics, the **English** riding style is by far the most popular, and has been adopted by sporting riders everywhere.

In this document, however, we're going to look at **Western** riding. This style has roots in the military riding traditions brought to the Americas by Spanish invaders. The style was then adapted to ranch work by the Spanish 'vaqueros' and the American cowboy. Today, Western riding is practiced primarily in the Americas – but Western riding fans can be found all over the world.



*Western*



*English*

**vs.**

Heavy saddle for all day-support

Tack is often very decorative

Loose contact with bit and reins

Can be ridden with one hand

For trail riding, ranch work and rodeo

Light saddle for ease of movement

Tack is simple and elegant

Constant contact with bit and reins

Ridden with two hands on the reins

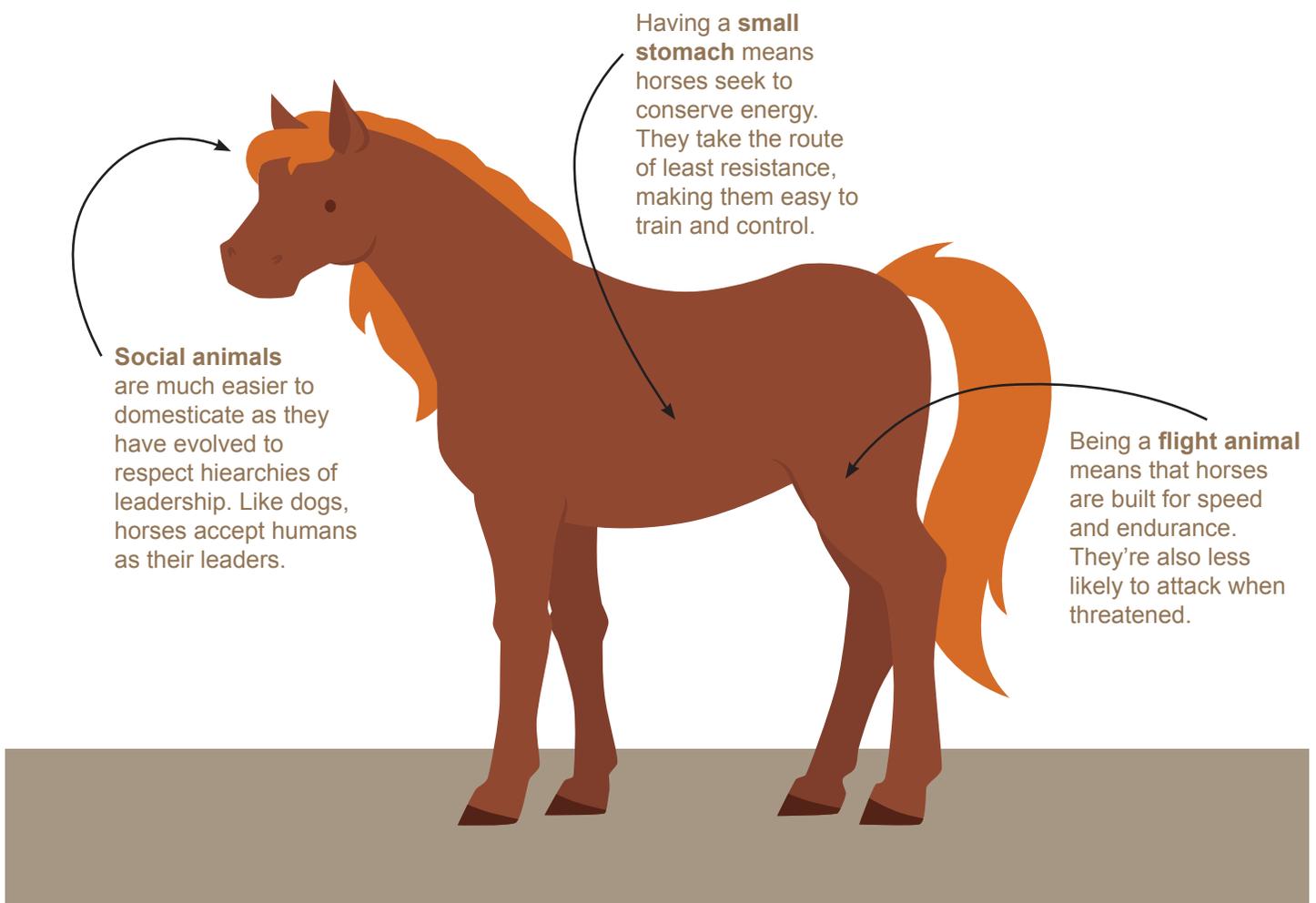
For jumping, dressage, polo, etc.

# What is a Horse?

Humans have kept domesticated horses for riding, driving and labour as far back as 4000 BCE. But why horses? Why not... antelopes, or emus, or bears? Many other animals could theoretically be ridden, but none were as suited to co-existence with humans as the horse. The reason for this has a lot to do with the evolution of the horse itself.

Horses are grass-eating herbivores evolved for life on the plains. In the wild (and in the paddock) they live in herds and spend much of their time grazing (and not doing very much else). Compared to other grazers they have fairly small stomachs, and prefer to conserve energy. At the same time they specialise as a 'flight' animal – when threatened, they instinctively run to safety.

All these characteristics made the horse an excellent candidate for domestication. Take a look at the graphic below to find out why.



# Training Horses

Humans train lots of animals, both for work and for pleasure. But of all our animal counterparts, few require the kind of precise communication that a horse and rider need to share before they can succeed in even the most basic riding. So, how do we do it? The following complimentary strategies are used every time a trainer, rider or handler works with a horse.



Like any animal, horses can be trained with **positive reinforcement**. Treats (like grain, apples and carrots) can be used to reward behaviour, and are often used to teach specialised 'tricks'. However, horses do have a finite appetite, and treats can't easily be fed when a rider is mounted. Because of this, verbal and physical reinforcement (like pets, stroking and vocal affirmation) are more commonly used to reinforce correct riding behaviours.



Humans can't control horses directly through pressure; they're big enough to ignore every attempt to shove, pull or prod them in any direction. However, **pressure** can be used to 'cue' a horse – that is, to tell the horse what it is that we want them to do. We condition the horse to respond to that cue by **removing pressure** the moment they perform the correct action. Horses' natural tendency to take the route of least resistance means that they would rather do what we ask of them rather than fight back (and keep being annoyed by persistent humans).



The best way to guarantee that a horse does the right thing is by **making the right thing easy**. 'Easy', of course, is subjective to each horse and rider. It's a rider's job to pick achievable targets and ask for behaviours that their horse understands. Riders must start at the basics and move on from there to develop desirable skills.

Conversely, negative behaviours can be discouraged by **making the wrong thing difficult**. Since horses want to conserve energy, simply making them do more work when they make the wrong choice is enough to influence their future decisions.

# Saddle Up and Ride!

There really is no one correct way to saddle up a horse or get dressed for horseback riding. In a casual setting, all you need to do is to make sure that you and your horse can ride safely and comfortably.

However, most people chose to ride Western because of their appreciation for cowboy culture. For this reason, there are many well-loved traditions when it comes to choosing western tack (saddles, bridles and other equipment put onto the horse) and rider attire. Those who compete in Western riding events also need to adhere to certain standards.

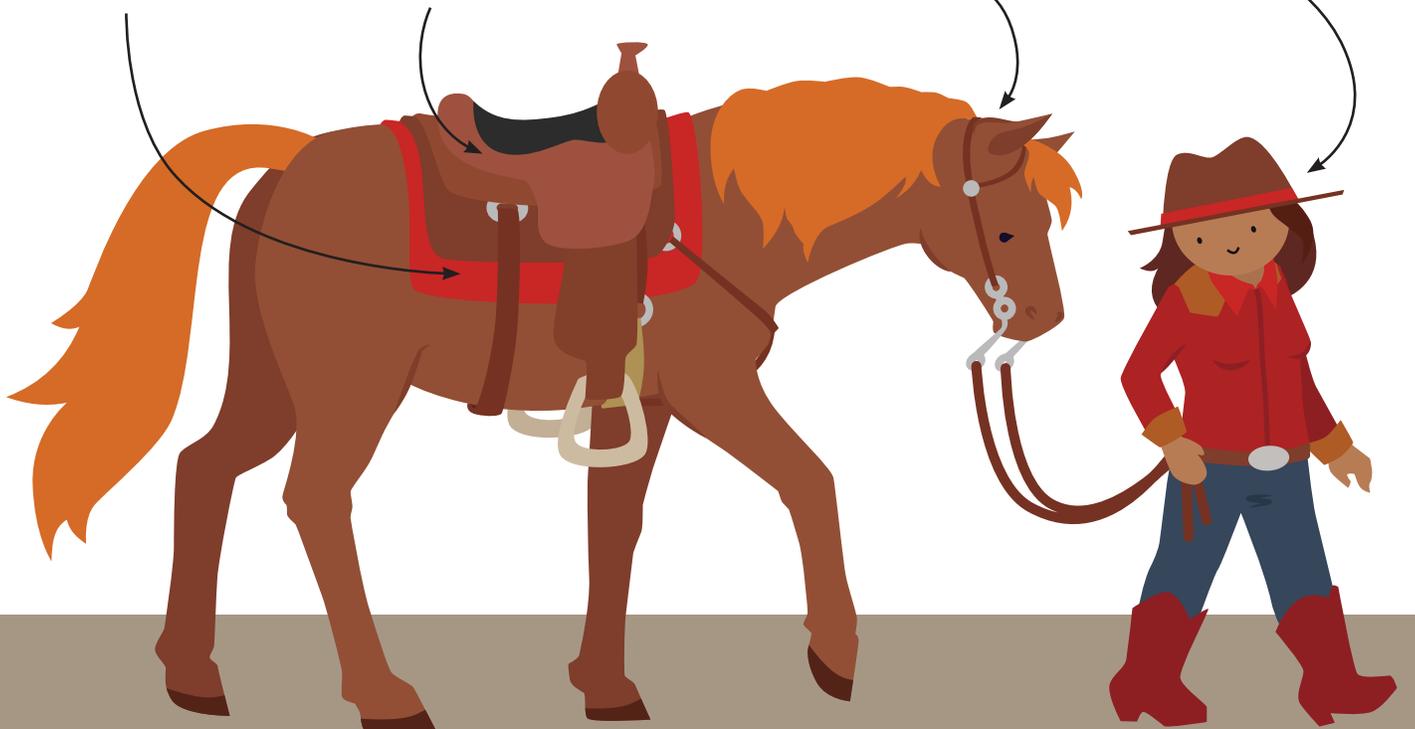
Let's take a look at some of the equipment you might see on a Western horse and rider.

Western horses wear a thick **blanket** under their saddles. Blankets are often decorated in 'Navajo' or other traditional patterns, but plenty of contemporary styles are available.

The **western saddle** is designed to support the cowboy over a full day of riding. Thick fenders protect the cowboy's legs from sweat, and the horn is used like a hitch when roping cattle.

The **western bit and bridle** is designed to be used with one hand (so that a cowboy can rope, shoot and drink whiskey). The goal is to use the bit as lightly as possible.

Riders dress in **western attire**; a cowboy hat (or helmet for young riders), western shirt, belt, jeans, cowboy boots, and optional leather chaps.



# Competitive Events

Western riders are a diverse bunch. Some continue to work in the saddle on ranches around the world, while others are content to enjoy a peaceful trail ride out in the country. But for those who have a competitive streak, there's no shortage of belt buckles and saddles to be won at many different riding events.

Here is a selection of some popular events that riders compete in.



In **Western Pleasure** competitions, horses and riders are judged on their ability to maintain a relaxed but collected gait over a sustained time. Horses are judged on their manners and the ability to remain calm and quiet.



In **Reining** competitions, riders guide their horses through precise patterns of movement. Reining routines involve a variety of different gaits, circles, and stops. Signature moves include spins and sliding stops. Throughout the performance, the rider's cues should be as subtle as possible.



In **Cutting** competitions, the horse and rider work together to separate a cow from a larger herd. The rider works to select the cow and lead her away from the herd. When she instinctively tries to return to the herd, the rider lets the reins go slack. It is the horse's job to prevent the cow from returning by moving to block it.



In **Working Cow Horse** or **Reined Cow Horse** competitions, horses and riders move a single cow around an arena according to a prescribed pattern. Depending on the event, they may have to follow a path, perform specific manoeuvres around the cow, or turn the cow in a certain manner.



Team **Penning** events see teams of three riders working together to separate marked cows from a larger herd, to move them across the arena, and to direct them into a small pen. Horses and riders work together to move the marked cows and keep the other animals from following.



In **Halter** competitions, horses are not ridden. Although handlers still dress in traditional western attire, the horse is judged on its conformation (its physical characteristics and suitability for breeding). Specific competitions differ, but generally points are also awarded for grooming and handler skill.



**Roping** is a set of timed rodeo events in which cattle are roped by riders on horseback. In Team roping, two riders rope a longhorn steer – one ropes the head while the other ropes the legs. In breakaway roping, one rider ropes a young calf. In calf roping, a rider ropes a calf, then dismounts to tie the calf's legs together. The rules and equipment is designed to prevent injury to the steers and calves.



**Barrel Racing** is a timed rodeo event in which a horse and rider circle three barrels in a standard 'clover-leaf' pattern. To be successful, the horse needs to make sharp turns while maintaining a good speed. A horse that can stay close to the barrels will cut down the time needed to complete the pattern, but knocking over barrels results in time penalties.



**Steer Wrestling** is a rodeo event in which a mounted rider chases a longhorn steer, then jumps from the running horse to wrestle the steer to the ground. The rider must depend on the horse to come alongside the steer and keep up a consistent speed even as he or she jumps off.



**Rough Stock** is the term used to refer to events in which competitors ride bulls or bucking horses (broncos) who attempt to throw or 'buck' the rider off their backs. Modern bucking horses are not wild or scared of the rider; they have been specifically bred for their agility, strength and bucking ability.



# Thanks!

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