

## ONE-HORSE PACKING WITH AN ENGLISH SADDLE

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One of my favorite things is horse packing — any combination of camping and horses is just right for me. Thanks to my great friends at BCHU, I had so much fun on my first pack trip that I determined to find a way to 'horse pack' with my one horse and my English saddle (because that is what I had!). Now I carry all my own gear (food included in many cases), and have a spare hand for a useful pack animal for someone else (like last summer when we packed wood into the High Uinta Wilderness Area to build bridges over a marshy area near a lake).



Horse packing is not that different from back packing. The lighter the load, the better. I try to limit my pack to 50 pounds, which still feels like camping in luxury. The biggest difference between horse packing and back packing is that very few boy/girl scouts actually try to BUCK off their packs. LIGHT and TIGHT are the essential elements of horse packing, no matter how many horses you take. There should also be a word in there for Balance, because there is nothing that falls under your horse's belly faster than an off-balance pack. So let's say that a horse pack needs to be LIGHT, TIGHT, and UPRIGHT.

Let's start with LIGHT. Here is my list of stuff to take, grouped into the sections of the pack.

### [ 1 ] FANNY PACK

Tent, ground cloth and foam pad.



(yes, even in dry Utah, I figured this out AFTER sleeping on a damp pad my first pack trip). And I use the plastic garbage bag later to store my saddle and tack outside my tent and out of the rain and dew.



This fanny pack is for the horse, not you. It sits on the horse's hips, behind everything else, so I made it my lightest element. Buy a nice little back packing tent, and add a small ground cloth (I use a plastic shower curtain because it is small and light and I can replace it as needed). Wrap the foam sleeping pad around the tent, and be sure there are no rough, solid or 'pokey' parts sticking out to rub on the horse. Wrap all of that in a plastic garbage bag to keep it from getting wet in a summer thunderstorm

Buy or sew a drawstring bag that fits all of this. It really helps if the bag has straps that can be used to tighten/squeeze all of this together. Mine has 3 straps, as shown in the picture. I found it at Kmart in the camping section. Very important! Add a clip to each end of the bag where the white arrows are. I just

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sewed mine on after the fact. (If you don't sew, most dry cleaners have someone who will do it for you, and most cobblers will do the heavier duty parts too). You MUST have a way to keep the fanny pack from sliding side-to-side. It sits on the horse's hips, where it gets the most bounce, and will sort of squirt out the side and hang down in a horse-scary fashion if you don't take care to anchor the side-to-side.

### [ 2 ] TOP PACK

Sleeping bag, camp stool, solar shower, warm coat,/hat/gloves extra jeans, horse pellets (if needed in low feed areas)

The top pack and saddle bags came together, and the top pack was supposed to Velcro on/off, which seemed nice at the time (less to hoist up over the horse's back). Unfortunately, in practice it just velcroed itself OFF, so I had a cobbler sew it to the saddle bags permanently. I found this pack at the local horse supply store (Callisters). I put another large garbage bag in the top pack, fill it with soft things



(like coats and sleeping bag) in the bottom, with the camp stool in the top, and zip it all into the top pack. Don't skimp on the sleeping bag. A nice small bag rated a lot lower than you think you will need is a wonderful thing. I also included a picture of this nifty camp stool (Packstool is what the label says) I found at REI that is a standard 3-legged stool where the legs also fold in the middle. Since the top pack rests right behind the saddle, be sure there are no lumps or bumps against the horse (BUCK prevention).

### [ 3 ] SADDLE BAGS

**Left:** Clothes, pillow case, water purifier, towel (small or larger can double as extra blanket), slippers (luxury, but with rubber soles, can double as spare shoes), first aid kit (for people and horse), camp stove, food, matches, mess kit, TP, wet wipes, camp soap, sun screen and other personal items, head lamp, extra batteries for head lamp, camera, and GPS, Extra rope just because. Rain gear (put over your sleeping bag at night for added warmth).

**Right:** Horse grain, Horse boot, Bug spray (horse AND people), grooming supplies, collapsible bucket, gall salve, hobbles, high line/tree savers.

The saddle bags carry the most weight, and it is very important that they be even in weight. I sewed a light nylon drawstring bag from waterproof material for each side. This way, I can load them up and weigh them apart from the pack

(either with a pack scale, which many packers carry, or by hand, which has been accurate enough) to be sure they are close in weight. I use one side mostly for personal items and the other side mostly for horse items.

Here are a few tricks on the personal side... a pillow is one of the great luxuries of camp that takes up too much space. You can get an inflatable pillow, but I just take an empty pillow case and fill it with my coats. That way I can always find my coat quickly, even at night, and I have a soft pillow. I take leather slippers with rubber soles just in case I have to get up in the night (It's not what you think ... like when the coyotes had the horses all upset, or when one of the horses got tangled in his too-long lead rope, fell down, and had to be extricated in the middle of the night...And they can double as shoes if mine get wet). The food, water purification, and cooking is pretty much just like backpacking. There are entire books on this subject, so I'll leave that part out.

On the horse side, pack the highline and hobbles near the top of the bag where you can get to them first. When you get to camp, tie your horses solidly to a tree, put up your high line, and get them safely tied. There are many great yarns told round the campfire of 'when the pack horses got away'. Teach your horse to high line and to hobble at home.

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### [ 4 ] DAY PACK

Water bottles (full!), camera, cell phone, GPS, compass, map, rain gear, sun glasses, helmet, light jacket

If we are setting up a base camp and day-riding from there, I usually take my day pack too, just on top of the camping pack. I use the water bottle holders going in, and then fill it back up with my rain gear, first aid kit, etc. for the day rides.

### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Essential tack: Saddle, bridle, halter, 12' lead rope with quick release clip, crupper, breast collar, saddle pad, extra saddle pad for pack

Start with the saddle. There are four important connection points — breast strap, crupper, strap from the pack to the seat, and saddle bag connection to the girth.

First is where the breast strap connects to the saddle. This needs to be connected to the tree, not just to a little bit of leather somewhere. Some saddles have rings in the front, but mine didn't. I added two nylon loops with D rings. Each loop goes onto the bar that holds the stirrup leathers with the D ring pointing out in front of the saddle. These loops can be purchased at most English tack stores (including Callisters), but I just sewed them. The breast strap is absolutely essential



*Loop with D-ring connected to the metal that holds the stirrup leather*

in this pack arrangement, because it keeps the saddle from slipping back, particularly when going up hill. Since all of the extra weight of the pack will also be trying to pull the saddle back on the horse, the breast strap is an essential element. It also makes it less likely that the saddle will flip all the way around and under the horse. It isn't enough to keep it from listing to the side, however, so you will need to maintain the UPRIGHTNESS of your saddle & pack by shifting it back to the center with your stirrups while riding if/when it gets off center.

The second major connection point is for the crupper. The crupper keeps the saddle and pack from slipping forward and is particularly important when going downhill. Otherwise, the saddle is likely to pinch the horse's shoulder and make him stumble or buck. (For the same

reason, be sure your saddle fits your horse well before adding a pack to it.) the crupper doesn't do much for UPRIGHTNESS of the pack, it is mostly for keeping it from sliding forward.

My saddle didn't have a ring for the crupper. I tried a commercial

crupper holder ... a piece of plastic that fit under the two pads in the back underside of my saddle. A D ring on a loop was connected to the plastic piece. This worked fine for regular rides but was not durable enough for packing. I cut a piece of a wooden ruler about 4" long, put a D ring on a nylon loop around that, and jammed it tightly under the padding in the back underside of my saddle. It was worked great ever since, and I never take it off, even if I am not using a crupper.



*Piece of wooden ruler between padding at back of saddle, nylon loop & D ring for crupper*

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Now let's talk about the crupper. The crupper is going to lie under your pack, which means there will be weight sitting on the crupper strap the entire distance from the back of the saddle to the horse's hip. All of the commercial crupper straps I found have a buckle some place along that distance. The first year I packed this way, my horse did a really good rodeo when I first got on, which is quite uncharacteristic for him. I got off, checked for anything that might be poking or hurting him, didn't find anything and wrote it off as uncertainty about the newness of the pack. When we got to camp, the crupper buckle, which even had a plastic protector between the horse and the buckle, had worn a buckle-sized chafe in my horse's rump. No wonder he was trying to buck it off! I felt terrible. Good thing I had brought along gall salve ... No amount of padding will eliminate this problem, so you will need to custom-build a crupper. I used a 2" wide nylon strap, had the cobbler sew the buckles for my old crupper on one end, and I sewed about 4" x 2" of Velcro on the other. Now I attach the crupper to the saddle with this Velcro patch, and the strapping is soft enough not to cause galling.

Put your regular saddle blanket under the saddle, and add a light blanket for the pack. Put this extra saddle blanket under the crupper strap for extra comfort. Be sure there are no lumpy edges under the saddle,

or any place the pack weight will be distributed. I used the straps from the extra saddle pad to connect the saddle pad to the Girth D-rings. I also ran them up through the D-rings on the top pack for added security as shown.



You will need some extra straps for your pack. The first will go from one D-ring on your pack over the seat of the saddle to the other D-ring and back. Use a 2 1/2 ft piece of 1" nylon webbing, and sew 8" of Velcro on the straps on either end so that it forms a circle when vel-

croed together. Velcro this as tightly as you can. You will be sitting on the Velcro of the strap, under your seat pad, with the D-rings of the top pack snugged right up against the 'hips' of your saddle.

This will hold the pack firmly to your saddle, and if it gets a little off balance, you can RIGHT it by shifting your saddle back into place. Since the top pack

is sewn to the saddle bags, they stay in place this way too. I tried several other arrangements for keeping the pack reasonably centered, and this is the only one that really worked. This connection must be TIGHT for the pack to stay RIGHT.



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You will also need to add a D-ring on the girth buckles of your saddle to connect the pack to the girth. I used about a 10" piece of 1" nylon, added a D-ring and closed it with Velcro as shown. Do this for both sides of your saddle. I leave this on my saddle all the time now. I chose to connect one part of my pack (the top pack, as shown here) to the back girth buckle. The lower part (the saddle bags) is connected to the front girth strap. This was a deliberate choice to distribute the force on the girth buckles. Be sure your girth buckles are in good shape, so they don't tear or give way.

I connect the saddle bag D-ring to this Girth D-ring using a shoelace in this picture. This is tied in such a way that it can be quickly untied (although pulling the Velcro on the Girth D-ring is an even quicker emergency release). I've also tried

using a buckle, but I haven't had as much flexibility in getting that tight enough. And I've tried Velcro, but that piece is too short and tends to come loose. So, for now, it is a shoelace. The Day pack straps are also connected to the Girth D-ring.

The last connection is between the saddle bags (near the bottom) and

the girth. My pack had D-rings meant (I think) to connect to the back cinch of a Western saddle. Instead, I made two straps about 2.5 ft long with Velcro to make a loop and connected them to the cinch of my saddle. This picture shows them connected to the back cinch buckle, but I have since changed and put them on the front cinch buckle instead. I also added a leather 'keeper', because they sometimes got undone by the movement of my leg. This connection keeps the saddle bags from flapping to the sides and from shifting to the back, particularly when going up hill.

Now your pack is in place, and you are ready to add the tent/sleeping pad bag. I added two D-rings to the back of my pack, that matched the two clips I added to the tent/sleeping pad bag. I can quickly and easily clip the bag to the pack,



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so that it isn't falling to the horse's side. But it still isn't tight. So I added two nylon straps that go around the top pack and the tent bag, strapping the bag tightly to the top pack. This tends to lift the bag slightly off the horse's rump, so I try to adjust is so that it sits on or close to the rump. The last thing most horses need is something tapping or slapping on their rump!

Your duster or rain gear can be strapped under the tight strap used to hold the tent bag, too.

### PROPER PREPARATION

Hopefully by now you have decided to 'try this out at home' long before you hit the trail in earnest. I started by ground training and then riding with clunky pans in my regular saddle bags, leaving them flapping so they made plenty of racket. Then I added a sheet and eventually a rustling piece of plastic tarp behind my saddle, over his rump, so there was plenty to flap in the wind. Then I rode with just the top pack & saddle bags, again with plenty to rattle in them. Last, I added the tent bag. First I rode with it tied tightly, as it is on the trail. But before we went out on the trail, we also rode with it loose and bumping against his hips (connected just by the clips with some twine to help just in case the clips broke or tore loose). Be sure it is light enough that this bumping won't actually hurt your horse in any way. I used just the soft foam pad when we did the 'bump and thump

training'. Along with this 'pack sacking' we also did plenty of high line tie practice and learned to hobble. Most pack books talk about how to train your horse for those things.

### WAS IT WORTH IT?

You betcha!!! We've seen some of the most beautiful country, been to places we would otherwise never have gone, and enjoyed camp fires with some of the nation's finest hobbles.

And how important was the 'pack sacking'? Well, on our 3rd pack trip one of the pack horses took a fit — the one carrying dinner for 15 people — and took off up the mountain with the wrangler's riding horse in tow. Since I was the only (sort of) experienced rider without a pack horse, I took off after the pair, galloping up a steep, brushy hillside. And my packs held! Nothing broke loose! Everything stayed upright! And my horse didn't seem to care one iota about all the stuff he was carrying. No bucking! I caught the riding horse easily, and eventually the panicked pack horse, whom I had to lead out through about a mile of dense aspen underbrush. My horse (and I) had never ponied a horse before, let alone a skittish pack horse, but we did just fine, and brought him back to the group an hour or so later. That's the stuff that campfire yarns are made of. My English saddle may be a bit of an anomaly

on the pack trail, but no one teases me (much) about it any more.

Like any other horse activity, packing takes judgment. Be sure both you and your horse are ready before trying each new thing. Prepare well in advance, Practice at home. Get help from an experienced trainer if you need it. Be sure your tack is in excellent shape and suitable for the task. Wear a helmet. Be careful and have fun!

### SAFE AND HAPPY



### TRAILS!

— Cindy Furse & 'Friday'

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