English Riding vs. Western Riding

An Overview of English and Western Riding Sports and Saddles
A Note From The Editor

Here at MyHorse Daily we are committed to bringing you the latest information designed to keep you and your horse healthy, happy and productive.

Enjoy the read!

Amy Herdy, Managing Editor
MyHorse Daily
So you’re ‘going equine,’
and it’s time to decide: English or Western?

Here’s a guide to each discipline and what’s involved.

Adapted from articles in Horse&Rider
by Jayne D. Wilson and Gavin Ehringer, and in EquiSearch.com by Jessica Jahiel

If you’re new to the horse world, it can seem overwhelming. So many choices!
Now that you’ve found a horse to ride, you need to figure out what kind of riding you want to do—and what kind of saddle to use.

Do you want to herd cows? Try jumping? Explore trails? There are many different activities you can do with your horse, whether you ride English or Western. Here’s a breakdown of what each discipline offers:

**Western Pleasure** is a showing class in which horses are exhibited in a group in the arena, performing changes of gait and direction as requested by the judge. Horses are judged on their appearance, style and movement.

In **barrel racing**, horse and rider enter the arena at high speed and negotiate a pattern of three barrels, turning tightly around each barrel without going too wide (thus wasting precious seconds), or cutting in too close and possibly knocking a barrel over and losing points. This is a speed sport and the fastest across the finish line wins.

In **roping events**, the rider follows a steer out of the chute, aims and throws the lasso while riding at speed. He then secures the lasso around the saddle horn and the specially trained horse comes to a quick halt to hold the steer. The rider quickly dismounts, grounds the steer and quickly ropes its legs. In this timed event, the quickest person to get his steer roped—and raises his arms to signal to the judge that he has completed the task—wins.

**Cutting** takes a very special horse. In cutting events, horse and rider enter a group of cattle and single one out. With his body movements, the horse “cuts” the steer away from the other cattle and then prevents it from moving back to the herd for a preset period of time. Since the steer is determined to join his herd mates, the horse will have to continually face the steer and anticipate which way it will go, moving himself quickly left and right to block escape.

In **reining** classes, horse and rider perform a preset pattern of movements involving circles,
spins, slides and turns. Reining has been called the “Western dressage” and is always a crowd pleaser. Horses and riders are judged on the obedience of the horse to the rider’s aids, as well as on accuracy.

In competitive trail classes, horse-and-rider teams enter the arena separately and work through a series of obstacles such as gates, patterns of poles which they must reverse through, etc. The idea is to simulate in the show ring those obstacles that might be found out on the trail. Horses are judged on their obedience to the rider’s aids and the willingness with which they perform each task asked of them.

In dressage, horse and rider follow a set pattern of movements on the flat. This “test” includes circles and straight lines, changes of pace and direction and, at the higher levels, lateral movements, collections and extensions of gait. Each team is judged on accuracy, the obedience and submission of the horse to his rider’s aids, correctness, straightness and presence. Dressage is often compared to Western reining.

Hunter classes can be on the flat or over fences. In Hunter under Saddle classes, the horses enter the arena as a group and perform the changes of gait and direction as requested by the judge. They are judged on their obedience to the rider’s aids, their gaits and their elegance. They maintain an even head carriage and smooth, quiet paces throughout.

Clockwise from top left: The range of horse sports includes everything from cutting, eventing and hunters/jumpers to team roping, dressage and Western Pleasure — to name just a few.
In hunter classes over fences, the horses are judged on style as they negotiate a course of jumps. They should maintain a steady, even gait, switching leads when appropriate and jumping the fences with style. In fact, style is the main criterion for judging in hunter classes over fences and a horse which, even though it clears the fences, dangles a foreleg or puts an extra stride in front of a fence, will be marked down.

In jumper classes, horses are judged on their ability to cleanly negotiate a series of fences. Unlike in hunter classes, style is not taken into account, so if your horse doesn’t have the level head carriage and smooth, calm gait required for the hunters, but can jump anything you put in front of him, jumper classes may be where you’ll shine.

Eventing, or combined training, has its roots in the military, where horses needed stamina while also showing agility and obedience to their riders. The three classic phases in eventing are dressage, cross-country jumping and stadium jumping. Any type of horse can take part in eventing, so horses that perhaps aren’t fancy enough for showing or aren’t elegant enough for hunter classes can participate. At the very highest levels, eventing requires stamina, obedience and courage from the horse to clear the very formidable fences on the cross-country course. But at the lower levels, it’s something everyone can enjoy just as much as a pleasant ride in the country.

Both English and Western riders regularly hit the trails and compete in long-distance or endurance rides. Endurance rides take place over a set distance, perhaps 25, 50 or 100 miles. Time must be taken to condition the horse for this event and care is taken during the competitions to make sure that horses remain in good health throughout.

In England, many English riders participate in gymkhana events, which are various races and games on horseback. These have their roots in medieval jousting. Every summer show in England has a ring in which the gymkhana events are held and children of all ages hurdle up and down the ring grabbing potatoes balanced on buckets from the back of their ponies, or snaking through a line of poles. Many Pony Clubs hold Mounted Game team competitions, culminating in the Prince Phillip Cup, which is held annually at the Horse of the Year Show.

In the United States, gymkhana events include barrel racing, pole bending and flag races, and participants are not limited to children. Gymkhanas of any type require a horse or pony that has agility and speed and shows obedience to the rider, who may at any time be hanging off to one side reaching for something. However, no particular breed is required and
horses are not judged on appearance or quality, so horses that aren’t appropriate for showing in other disciplines can usually, with the right training, make the switch to mounted games or gymkhanas.

A Western Saddle Buyer’s Primer

Ready to shop for a Western saddle? Here’s a guide to how Western saddles differ by event discipline, plus a list of brands and a handy seat-sizing chart.

**Trail & pleasure:** Wide selection; padded seat, large skirt, light tree (usually plastic or new “flex” trees), in-skirt rigging, high or low cantle; not designed for roping or ranch work

**All-around:** Flat seat for versatility; often padded, suede seats; close-contact skirting to assist in “feel”; reinforced rigging, roping-style horn and wooden tree for light roping

**Barrel racing:** High cantle with deep seat pocket for security; short skirt, high horn, in-skirt rigging; often with suede seat or tooled seat back and jockeys for added grip

**Cutting:** Low cantle, high pommel and horn; flat seat with low rise at pommel; back cinch and slim stirrups; jockeys and fenders of rough-out material for grip

**Endurance:** Comfortable seat; lightweight, no saddle horn; minimal skirt, many saddle strings for securing equipment

**Ranch:** Big, heavy; slick seat for all-day riding and easy care; sturdy tree for roping; high cantle and back cinch; typically with plate rigging, which is easy on the horse

**Reining:** Close-contact saddle for rider feel and ease of providing leg, foot cues; low horn and pommel to facilitate rein handling; often highly decorated for show arena; flat seat for easy hip movement

**Roping:** Strong, sturdy tree of wood wrapped in rawhide, bullhide or fiberglass; reinforced rigging and back strap;

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**Western Saddle Seat Sizing Chart by Rider’s Weight and Height**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weight Range</th>
<th>5’- 5’5” tall</th>
<th>5’6” - 5’9”</th>
<th>5’10”+</th>
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<tr>
<td>100-125 pounds</td>
<td>15”</td>
<td>15”</td>
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<td>126-145</td>
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<td>146-165</td>
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<td>166-185</td>
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<td>166-185* Pear-shaped</td>
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<td>196-225</td>
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<td>226-250</td>
<td>17”</td>
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<tr>
<td>226-250* Pear-shaped</td>
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<td>250+</td>
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*Pear-shaped women
“pocket” seat and suede material provide excellent grip and help strengthen rider’s position, whether standing or seated.

Show: Detailed tooling, often with silver work on skirts, cantle, pom- mel, horn and stirrups; equitation seats emphasize balance; deep pockets aid the rider’s position; “turned” stirrups for easy foot placement; often close-contact.

Training: Reining-style saddle trees common; low pommels and cut-out skirts for close contact; padded, suede seats for grip; fenders and jockeys of rough-out leather for added grip.

Buying English Saddles and Related Tack

English saddles come in three basic styles:

Dressage saddles have a wide, deep seat and straight-cut flap to accommodate the rider’s more upright position and longer leg.

Close-contact or jumping saddles have a more forward-cut flap and a flat seat, enabling the rider to better achieve a two-point position (in which his or her seat is out of the saddle with the legs as the only two points of contact).

All-purpose or eventing saddles have a moderately deep seat and wide flaps that are sufficiently forward-cut to keep the rider comfortable during both flatwork and jumping. Some jumping saddles, such as the Bates Caprilli Close Contact, feature an especially deep seat for extra stability when riding hunters, jumpers and eventers.

Fittings: When you buy an English saddle, all you get is ... the saddle. You must purchase your stirrup leathers, stirrups, stirrup pads and girth separately. The good news: Most saddle manufacturers make girths and leathers that match their saddles. Your stirrups should be heavy stainless steel with...
white pads for comfort and traction. There are various types of show-ring-acceptable safety stirrups designed to release a trapped foot: Peacock stirrups replace the outside branch with a heavy rubber band, and Australian-pattern or “S-curve” stirrups have a curved outside branch.

Saddle pad: Your show pad should be white, absolutely clean, thin and unobtrusive. Most are made from quilted cloth or fleece.

Bridle: English bridles consist of a headstall, cavesson (nose band), browband, two cheekpieces, reins and a bit. Purchase the bit separately. Some bridles come with reins and some don’t.

Ordering the reins separately lets you specify the length, width and texture that you prefer.

- More than one horse? You don’t necessarily have to buy more than one saddle—investigate saddles like the “Collegiate Convert-ibles” from Weatherbeeta USA. Choose from close contact, eventing or dressage styles, all featuring the Easy-Change Gullet System. “These are attractive, affordable, and adjustable, ideal for the entry-level English rider with more than one horse,” says Weatherbeeta Marketing Manager Mary Conti.
- On a budget? Think synthetic!

Good synthetic saddles are lightweight, inexpensive, easy to clean and perfectly acceptable at almost all competitions. Thorowgood and Win-tect both make excellent synthetic saddles, and Wintec now offers a matching synthetic bridle. You can mix and match your tack, just as long as the colors are similar enough to present a nice, pulled-together picture in the show ring.

English Schooling Tack

You may have one saddle and two bridles—one for schooling, one for show. You’ll also need two tack accessories for schooling: saddle pads, and polo wraps or protective boots.

Saddle pads: Those blazing-white show pads look spectacular in the show ring, but as every rider knows, white pads are magnets for dust, dirt and stains, so save yours for competition. You can buy a white schooling pad or you can branch out. You’ll find they come in all colors, color combinations and patterns. If you want a pad that features sheep, cats, stars, chili peppers or a bright tie-dye pattern, you’ll be able to find it.

Leg protection: If you want your horse to have that color-coordinated look while you school, you can probably find polo wraps to match your saddle pad. Polo wraps provide some leg protection in case your horse knocks one leg with another. If you’d rather use boots than wraps, feel free; brushing boots, splint boots and sport boots aren’t allowed in the show ring, but are fine for schooling. And once again, you can have fun with colors. Sports boots and splint boots come in a wide range of colors, and you can even purchase a set of splint boots with built-in glitter.

A bit on bits: English riding involves constant light contact through the reins to create constant communication between the bit and your hands.
Your horse needs to be familiar and comfortable with his bit, so the one he wears at a show will usually be the same one he wears when you’re schooling at home.

For most English-riding competitions, the appropriate bit is a snaffle without shanks. A shanked (or curb) bit features a metal piece welded to each end of the bit’s mouthpiece, to which you’d then attach the reins. This bit—which typically features a chin strap or chain—provides leveraged pressure to your horse’s mouth and poll, and isn’t appropriate in English riding. (Tip: Some shanked bits with jointed mouthpieces are mislabeled as “snaffles.” Don’t be fooled. If a bit has shanks, it’s a curb.) With a snaffle bit, you’ll apply direct pressure to your horse’s mouth.

Smooth, unadorned metal is the standard for both mouthpiece and rings. Many of today’s most popular English bits, such as the ones made by Herm Sprenger and Kangaroo, are made from alloys containing some copper.

Innovative bits that have gained a following among top hunter/jumper professionals include Myler and Mikmar bits. “We’re just trying to get your horse as relaxed as possible so it’s easier for you to train him as you see fit,” says Dale Myler of the snaffle bits he has designed, which give your horse release “when he relaxes and comes to you.” Mikmar bits, which were developed years ago by horseman Frank Evans, have been acclaimed recently by the likes of international show jumping stars Ludger Beerbaum, Rodrigo Pessoa and Kevin Babington. These bits are designed to disperse the pressure of the rider’s hands by sending a signal to the nose, jaw, poll, bars and tongue simultaneously.

In conclusion, whether you choose to ride Western or English, you’re sure to enjoy yourself even more once you’ve got the right equipment.