



PREPARATION, PLANNING, & KNOWLEDGE

Packhorses help carry you into adventure but require user horse sense

Dusty Smith

Shorter days and the crisp in the air mean one thing in our family: hunting is just around the corner.

Packing into Wyoming wilderness areas can be done on foot, but we choose to use our horses to take us on adventures.

Horses can be very useful when carrying loads into the backcountry but can be a big commitment initially to purchase equipment and prepare.

There is essential equipment needed for packing horses:


- **Pack saddle** – saddle made for packing loads
- **Pack saddle pad** – larger than regular saddle pad
- **Lash cinch** – strip of material with a ring on one end and a hook on the other. A 20- to 50-foot rope is tied to the ring end and used to attach the load.
- **Rope** – used for securing load, tying or staking horses, and many other uses
- **Pannier** – large canvas bags or hard-sided boxes with loops that hang on the pack saddle

- **Manty** – large piece of canvas used to cover and secure load

Pack Saddles Types

There are two different styles of pack saddles – the traditional “Sawbuck,” which has two distinct looking “X’s” made of wood on top, and the “Decker,” which consists of two metal bars shaped into oblong hoops. Sawbucks use a single rope attached to a lash cinch to hitch loads, and Deckers use two ropes attached at the metal hoops to sling loads. The two pack styles carry the same load – just a little differently. Each can use panniers, but the Decker-style packs have become popular because of their versatility in packing odd-shaped loads.

Planning and preparation are a must to ensure proper load size, placement, and adequate number of



Always
remember to keep
those loads straight
and hitches pretty.

Extra preparation makes life up the trail easier

- Horses must be proficient at essential functions like how to lead, tie, stake, and hobble.
- They should be comfortable with things around and behind them. Practice draping a tarp over the horse and holding ropes around their haunches so they become comfortable. Having a horse that can be maneuvered over logs, through tight spaces, crossing water, and with a calm demeanor is ideal for packing.
- An exercise program for the horse should be started at least a month or two before your travels. A fat or out-of-shape horse that won't go up the trail is not fun and may ruin your trip. Usually, a good rule of thumb is a horse carrying 200 pounds can travel 20 miles a day for four days. They will need one or two days rest between trips.

Having these items covered at home before the trip will save headaches and accidents up the trail.



Photos 1, 2 and 3: Pigtailing horses to lead



Cinching a Decker pack saddle

animals. Horses can be loaded with different weights, but the weight will determine the distance you can travel in a day and the number of consecutive days traveled. Two hundred pounds is a heavy load and so will limit the distance you are able to travel. Try not to pack excessively – even though horses are packing the equipment, food, and personal items.

A scale is essential to ensure each load weighs the same on both sides of the horse. Mismatched loads by even a pound or two will cause many problems such as having a pack slip to one side or causing sores on the horse.

Secure loads with ropes so they do not slip or fall off. Many different knots and tying patterns (hitches) are used depending on the size and shape of the load. Tying the many hitches is an art and might be overwhelming at first. The most commonly used hitches are the Arizona box hitch, single and double diamond for the Sawbuck, and a basket or barrel hitch on the Decker. There are

many helpful books and videos to learn the hitches and knots. Some areas have packing schools that provide good hands-on instruction such as the National Outdoor Leadership School in Lander and Hoback Peak Outfitters in Alpine. Also, the *Packing and Outfitting Field Manual* by Oliver (Ollie) C. Hill is a great reference book all about packing.

Horse Care at Camp

Work has not ended once you get to camp. Horses need tended to every day. While hunting, fishing, or hiking, horses should be tied to a "high line." Don't leave them to graze while you are gone or you might end up packing all the gear out yourself or spend a lot of time looking for horses.

A high line is a heavy rope stretched between two trees at a height greater than 7 feet. When horses are tied to the rope, they are able to walk under the rope and stretch their legs. I prefer tying horses on a high line because of this mobility. Attaching bells helps locate horses in the event of an escape.



Basket hitch for a Decker pack saddle and tucking in extra rope

While back at camp, you can allow horses to graze while wearing hobbles or staked out – the lead can be up to 20 feet. In some areas, you might have to pack in horse feed, which usually must be certified weed-free. Check requirements for your destination, such as the specific national forest service office, to ensure you have everything needed.

Horses also need water, so finding a camp close to a water source is nice. Pack horse-care products like combs, extra shoeing supplies, and spray or ointment for any sores that might occur. You can never have enough extra rope. This can be made out of natural or synthetic fibers – it is really a personal preference.

Whether planning to go 1 mile or 100, horses can be used to pack items needed for the trip. If you do your research, are prepared, and have a good plan, a fun and exciting adventure awaits.

Lead packer Barrett Fumka of Saratoga



Meet the true horse packing professionals

If the U.S. Forest Service has some heavy lifting to do in remote areas, they call in the strong arms – or in this case, hooves.

The USFS Rocky Mountain Regional Specialty Pack String (RMRSPPS) is based out of Shawnee, Colorado, but works in South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming, covering 17 national forests and seven national grasslands.

Glenn Ryan, a head packer with the USFS, trains the pack string and coordinates trips. His equine A-team consists of 12 mules and five horses. When not in the backcountry, they are making public appearances and providing education on minimum impact recreation, stock handling, and packing skills.

The pack string supports a wide variety of projects, including hauling materials to support trail crews, assisting in trail maintenance/construction, hauling fish to stock remote streams/lakes, supporting firefighters during wildfires, and educational outreach such as “Leave-No-Trace.”

Since 1990, the RMRSPPS has been promoting continued trail use and enjoyment and wilderness preservation. They are true professionals of packing into roadless areas, and the USFS says they spread their knowledge through educating the public on the art and science of packing with horses and mules.

For more information, see <http://bit.ly/packstring>.

Dusty Smith is a horse trainer in Hyattville. He prepares all year and counts down to opening day of hunting. He can be reached at (307) 469-2003 or smithsaddles@hotmail.com.