



# ACF Riding Club



## Protecting your Horse's Lower Legs

No matter which discipline you watch, top performers can often be seen using boots and wraps on their horse's lower legs. More than a fashion statement, boots and wraps help protect the soft tissues of a horse's leg and support the leg structures such as tendons, ligaments, and joints. But not all boots are created equal. The type of boot you should use depends on your horse and the discipline in which you ride.

### When to Boot

Not all horses need to wear boots. However, horses that tend to overreach or knock their legs with their hooves should wear boots to protect their legs and ankles from bruises and scrapes. This is especially true if your horse wears shoes, which can cause more damage than a bare hoof.

Even horses that do not normally interfere with themselves may need boots when schooling tight or exaggerated maneuvers, such as lateral dressage work, spins or tight turns in Western performance events, or work in a round pen or on a lunge line. Another reason to use boots or wraps is to protect the horse's legs from impact with other objects, such as a mallet or ball during polo or the rails of a jump.

But, just because everyone else down in the barn puts boots or bandages on their horses, it doesn't mean you have to put protective gear on your horse. If you don't work your horse hard and he doesn't cut or scrape himself when you ride him, he may not need boots or bandages at all.

If you don't know if you should put protective gear on your horse's legs, ask a knowledgeable instructor what she thinks. Explain the sort of work you do with your horse and let her take a look at his conformation. An experienced instructor will be able to tell if your horse needs boots or bandages.

## Types of Boots and Wraps

### Splint Boots

Probably the most common boot used today, splint boots, also known as brushing boots, have a hard pad on the inside of the leg. This provides impact protection, guarding the inner leg and cannon bone from hits by the horse's opposite hoof or other objects. They are typically made out of neoprene but can also be made of leather or other material.

Splint boots are useful for horses that are prone to knock their legs with their own hooves or for horses whose legs may contact with other solid objects, such as trail horses, eventers on a cross country course, or even while turned out.

When putting a splint boot on, fit it slightly higher around the leg, then slide it down so the leg hair doesn't get ruffled up and cause rubs. Many people fasten the bottom strap first so the boot doesn't slip while you are securing it.



### **Tendon Boots**

As the name implies, tendon boots protect the tendons, ligaments, and joints at the back of the leg by covering them with a hard plastic, rubber, or leather shell. Many tendon boots leave the front of the cannon bone exposed, giving them the secondary name "open front boots." This is so that the horse can feel if he knocks a rail of a jump, discouraging him from doing so in the future.

Open front boots are very popular with show jumpers, but can be used with any horse who overreaches with the hind legs.

### **Sports Medicine Boots**

Sports medicine boots are designed to protect the entire lower leg, front and back, and act as a shock absorber. They use a high density neoprene which wraps the leg from the knee down, and around the fetlock joint. According to a study by the University of Oklahoma, sports medicine boots absorb 26 percent of hoof concussion — four times more than other traditional boots and wraps.

Most commonly seen on horses in Western disciplines such as reining, barrel racing, and working cow events, sports medicine boots can be used any time a horse's leg needs increased protection and support.

### **Skid Boots**

Skid boots protect the back of a horse's hind fetlocks and pasterns from burning during sliding stops or quick turns such as in reining. Skid boots are commonly made of leather or neoprene, and have a hard pad at the back which sits over the fetlock joint. Some protect just the fetlock area, while others extend upwards to protect the cannon bone and inner leg as well.

### **Fetlock Boots**

Fetlock boots, like skid boots, are worn on the hind legs. These boots protect the fetlocks on the interior portion of the leg from injury in horses that commonly brush or bang their fetlocks with their own hind legs and feet. They can be made of various materials, but typically have extra padding on the inside of the leg by the fetlock joint.

### **Bell Boots**

Bell boots, also called overreach boots; protect the bulb of a horse's hoof from overreaching injury. They sit on the bottom of the horse's foreleg, around the coronary band at the top of the hoof. They are designed to fit the contours of the pastern and heel area. Bell boots are used on the front hooves and they help protect the front heels from getting nicked by the back hooves. They are often used on horses that are prone to overreaching, on horses who wear shoes, and during events such as cross country when horses will be galloping and may accidentally overreach.

Traditional bell boots are made of rubber and are pulled on over the hoof. Newer styles have since been developed, including those made of neoprene and leather, those that are fastened

with Velcro rather than being pulled on, and those that are shaped so that the bell cannot spin around the hoof.



### **Polo Wraps**

Unsurprisingly, polo wraps were first used on polo horses to protect their legs against hits from mallets and other horses. Since then, they have entered practically every equestrian discipline as a way to protect a horse's legs. Contrary to popular belief, polo wraps on their own provide no support to the soft leg tissues.

Polo wraps, also known simply as "bandages" or "polos," are usually made of soft cotton or fleece material which is slightly stretchy, and are fastened with Velcro. It's very important to wrap bandages correctly, as polo wraps that are too tight or wrapped unevenly can cause damage to the leg.

Polo wraps are used in a variety of events and during schooling, but care should be taken to keep them clean and dry, as they tend to attract debris and can act like a sponge in water, making them heavy and more likely to fall off.

### **Exercise Bandages**

Mainly used for cross-country jumping, galloping, and strenuous dressage work. Exercise bandages are stretchy wraps that give support to the tendons in a horse's lower legs. They tend to be used when a horse is in strenuous work, or if he has suffered from tendon problems in the past. They are wrapped around the lower leg, and are usually secured with a Velcro strap.

Putting on a bandage properly is a skill that takes time to learn. If the bandage is not stretched out properly with the right tension or if it is wrapped incorrectly, it could hurt your horse's leg instead of supporting it. Ask an instructor to show you how to wrap a leg and then practice, practice, practice until you get it right.

### **Correct Fit**

No matter which type of boot or wrap you choose, it's important that it fits correctly. A poorly fitted or incorrectly applied boot or wrap can cause harm to the leg's soft tissues. Not only can they impede your horse's movement, they can cut off blood circulation and lead to tissue and tendon injuries. Boots that rub and chafe can cause discomfort, hair loss, or sores.

A well fitted boot should be the correct size, and apply even pressure without being too tight or too loose. Always inspect your horse's legs for signs of rubbing, heat, and swelling after using boots, particularly if the boots are new to your horse. Likewise, the boots should be inspected to ensure they are not broken or cracked. Any sand, dirt, or other debris should be cleaned off as it can turn a soft boot into sandpaper on your horse's skin.



Some people have also raised concerns about increased temperatures inside boots and wraps during work. Neoprene, the most common material used in equine boots, is not breathable and can trap heat and sweat beneath it. For this reason, it's important to not use neoprene boots for an extended period of time.

Used correctly in the right circumstances, however, boots and wraps can be of great benefit to your horse, protecting his legs so he can continue to do his job without injury.

# BOOTS & WRAPS