

Spur design and technology

By Amy Engle

On the surface, there's not much to a riding spur — it's a simple piece of metal designed to rest on the heel of a boot and provide gentle (or not so gentle) encouragement to the horse to listen to the leg cues of its rider. Spurs themselves have been around almost as long as the art of riding itself, and spur styles and designs have always changed to reflect both the riding styles and technology of the times. Medieval horsemen needed spurs with long necks that could reach around the body armor of their mounts, while modern dressage riders use relatively short spurs with blunt ends or small rowels in order to communicate the precise cues that are the hallmark of the sport.

While the most common styles of spurs used in the competitive disciplines of both English and Western riding haven't changed much in the past many years, there are a few innovations in technology and design that are well worth noting. Here's a quick overview of spur styles along with a look at some of the latest and greatest in design offerings from both popular manufacturers and new start-ups.

Spur style and selection

Spurs come in a wide variety of shank styles and lengths, and with different types of end shapes and rowels that range from incredibly mild to quite severe. While your customer's trainer will hopefully be the one dictating the type of spur they're looking to purchase, a basic understanding of the various spur designs — and their uses — is sure to serve you well when that inevitable spur-selection question comes your way. And although spur choice is a very personal thing, by asking a



few simple questions about their horse, riding experience, and riding discipline, you should be able to help guide your customer in the right direction.

Western or English? Because English and Western riders have very different tack and riding/leg positions, it should come as no surprise that, in general, they prefer very different types of spurs. Because English riders tend to have their lower legs in closer contact with the horse than Western riders, English spurs tend to be small and relatively mild. In contrast, the Western riding position is characterized by a longer leg that stays in less constant contact with the horse's sides. For this reason, Western spurs are often longer and may appear harsher than their English counterparts.

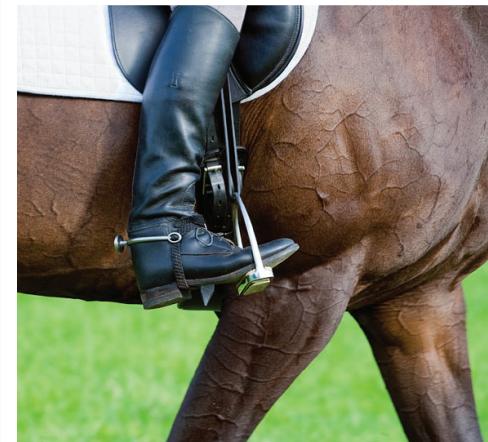
But as the old saying goes, don't judge a book — or in this case, a spur — by its cover.



Used correctly, some of the harshest looking spurs can actually be less severe than duller spurs used by a rider with an uneducated leg.

What discipline, if any, do they compete in? Most competitive riding disciplines have strict rules about what type of spurs can be used, and even if your customer isn't showing, they'll want something suited to their style of riding. For example, barrel racers often prefer "bumper" style spurs with small ridges on the inside of the heel piece that allow the rider to cue the horse without having to turn their heels in. Reiners like spurs with longer shanks that allow them to cue the horse with only the slightest movement of the leg, while ropers tend to prefer a shorter-shanked spur that isn't as likely to be engaged accidentally, spurring the horse into action at the wrong moment.

Don't be afraid to size up your customer... and their horse. A large part of



spur selection comes down to sizing: how tall is the rider and how tall, and what shape, is the horse? Tall riders on shorter horses, or slab-sided horses will need spurs with longer shanks in order to avoid having to draw their legs up in order to make contact with their horse. The same is true for short riders on big-barrelled horses. Though as a general rule, taller riders will need longer shanks, and shorter riders, shorter shanks.

But regardless of shape or size, some horses are simply more sensitive than others, and will require a very short or mild spur. All of these variables will come into play when selecting spurs, and is part of the reason for the stunning variety of styles available for riders, and retailers, to choose from.

Traditional designs

While spur designs have changed significantly throughout the centuries, modern-day spurs can generally be described as a variation on the following styles:

■ **Prince of Wales** — Perhaps the most popular style of English spur, the Prince of Wales (or POW) is a plain, flat-ended shank spur that comes in different lengths. The flat end makes it slightly sharper than other, blunt-end designs.

■ **Rounded end** — Spurs with a small rounded end, about the size of a marble. These are very mild and good for beginner riders or those with sensitive horses.

■ **Knob end** — Instead of flat edges like the POW spur, knob end spurs have rounded, blunt edges and are also relatively mild.

■ **Rowelled** — Seen on both English and Western style spurs, rowels are the spinning wheels (with or without teeth) at the end of the spur shank. While most rowels come with some type of teeth (blunt or sharp, many or