

HORSE CARE MYTHS & TIPS

By Ruthann Smith

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Tail Tails

World-class groom and braider, Ruthann Smith, reveals the often-surprising truth behind what you think you know about horsemanship. Her handy tips are based on the best of old school and new knowledge. Every month, she reveals routines of the most brilliant and seasoned grooms, making it easier to take better care of your horses, pocket, and earth.

Everyone loves big tails, but conventional wisdom regarding achieving them is based on myth. Prevailing methods for preserving tails actually thin them and inhibit growth. Having devoted my life to mane and tail crafts, this article will share what I learned while professionally braiding the tails of 12,000+ horses as well as developing award-winning coat care products. Nothing trumps experience. Chemical degrees and big marketing budgets can not compare with being consumed with improving tails while having hands in horses' hair, usually 18 hours a day, for decades on end.

The information that follows may surprise you, especially if you have sincerely intended to do best by your horse. Read on and you'll realize why these are true:

1. Tail bags weaken hair.
2. The don't touch tails rule actually increases breakage.
3. Detanglers thin tails and lock in stains.
4. Picking only is not the most important element to proper care.
5. Whitening agents generally make tails dirtier.

Healthy hair makes for stunning tails. This requires bringing the natural protective and fortifying oils to the surface, exfoliating to release them and using the tails motion to draw them down strands.

In certain circles tail bags are the norm. However, in Wellington, Florida, where top hunter, jumper, dressage and polo horses in the world winter, you'd be hard-pressed to find a tail bag. Yet, there



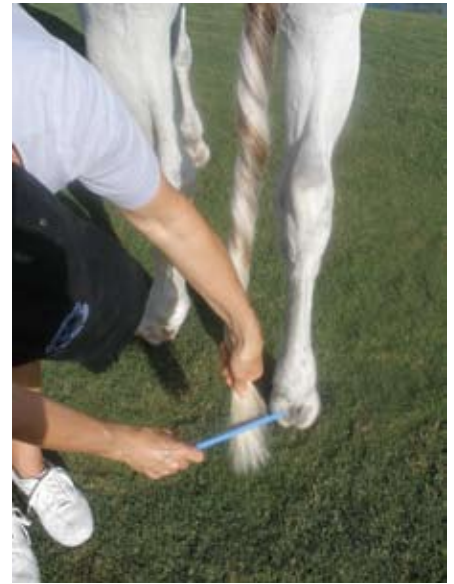
Virtually any horse can have a gorgeous tail with the methods outlined in this article.

are plenty of enormous tails. The idea of a tail bag is to protect the hair, but ironically, horses that wear them often have thin tails. So, what's going on? Did you ever notice frizzy or nappy hair can be very dry? How about that a mane thins out over a season when you often leave braids in overnight, even if the horse does not rub? These circumstances are all based around the same principle. The horse's natural protective oils do not move over the turns to slide down and fortify the strands. So, they get brittle to break.

Likewise, the idea that not touching tails saves them is misleading. First, ringlets and dreadlocks mean the hair is locked together in turns and does not move freely. So, oils do not readily move through the hair to strengthen it. Hair breaks. Plus, when you do need to get the tail ready to show, it is such an ordeal that far more hair breaks.

Detanglers are silicone or oil-based. They suffocate hair or attract sun and dirt, which parch them, leading to weakened hair. They also seal in stains, leaving hocks and tails yellow.

Whitening shampoos might leave hair looking clean for a moment, but they strip oils, making hair dry and porous.



To protect hair, twist and grip bottom. Move grip as section is organized, always starting from the bottom. The safest place to stand is on the side and close.

Thirsty, it attracts more dirt. Ever feel like a grey is always dirty? Most conditioners simply coat hair as well.

Would you rather daily care be easy and quick? What if tails stayed organized and cleaner longer? It is not only possible, but very simple. Here's how:

1. Use an all-in-one shampoo that fortifies without stripping hair. It should have aloe vera to promote growth, medical-grade tea tree oil to kill irritants and a light conditioner that actually enriches hair. While tea tree is nature's best anti-septic and anti-fungal, it can vary greatly in quality. To eliminate rubbing, soothe bites, promote healing and growth, make sure to use only the highest grade. Otherwise, you may stop itching for a moment, but ultimately promote it by leaving skin more vulnerable.

2. Use a big comb on clean, wet tails. Wet hair stretches, so it is more forgiving.

3. To comb wet tails, first twist the length to protect it. Then, grip the bottom. Comb from the bottom up to your grip. Then move your hold up 6-8 inches. Always start combing from the bottom. If you hit a snag, work it from below. Organize a tail to the roots. When it dries,

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To reduce the possibility of breakage, pinch small sections of hair at the base and slide down the length to comb tail with fingers. Gather organized hair in one hand.



hair will want to separate instead of wrap around itself.

4. Pick daily. The best option is to pick tails. That is pinch and pull small sections. Run your fingers down them to effectively comb the strands. Collect the organized sections in one hand.

5. Brushing can be fine IF you choose your implement carefully. Paddle brushes have too many bristles. I like

cheap ones made for blow-drying hair. Bristles need to be far apart with knobs that are the same piece as the bristle. Otherwise, they break off, leaving sharp ends that break hair. Always twist and hold the bottom of the tail

and work up it gently. Separate tangles from below. Never pull hard. Hold the brush very lightly, so if you hit a tangle you feel it and can work it gently.

6. If hair is sticking together because the tail is dirty and bathing is out, use an enzymatic spray made for horses. Properly pH balanced, it can break the bond between hair and dirt without coating or stripping hair. Wipe off impurities with a towel and comb wet.

Follow this routine if you want tails that dry full, light and floaty – tails in a different league. The motion pulls the oils down the strands. Healthy, volumized tails are easier to maintain. In fact, if you follow this program, you can actually shake shavings out of the tail for a week. However, I recommend daily maintenance, which is very quick. ■



Lucky Braids™ All-In-One Shampoo and Whitener Enzymatic Spray were awarded Product of the Year and Top Pick for Greys & Whites by *Horse Journal*, the equine version of *Consumer Reports*. Developed by world-class groom and braider, Ruthann Smith, Lucky Braids products make it easier to take better care of horses. Find more info and grooming tips at LuckyBraids.com and on Facebook.

This is not a stallion.

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Ruthann Smith, world-class groom + pro braider, developed Lucky Braids grooming products + Top Turnout Clinics to make quality care easier.

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