



**by Randy May**

How many hours a day do you sit and think about tack? Probably and hopefully not too many, unless you're a bit weird. Naturally you contemplate it while trying to clean the green crud out from under the buckles of your bridle, or when a stirrup leather breaks in mid-air as you fly over the coffin jump, but most of us can get through a day nicely without thinking about leather. This reluctance to deal with our attitude towards tack is an obvious symptom of the severe psychological quirk that affects us all—TACK FRENZY.

The average eventer owns enough tack to thoroughly equip a platoon of dragoons with a good deal left over. Most of us own tack which costs slightly more than our houses. Despite this plethora, at the introduction of a new style of bridle with neat white edges, every dressage and event rider in the country rushed out to buy one resulting in a mass escalation of the National Consumer Credit Level. Why is this? What are the symptoms of Tack Frenzy, or as it is more correctly known, Acute Riding Equipment Acquisition Syndrome or AREAS?

The first line of logic is legitimate and frequently heard. This is the "eventers always should ride with good, strong, new tack for our demanding sport" rationale. This sort of thinking can be credited for about 3.6% of all tack sales. The second reason is also legitimate and is commonly referred to as Murphy's Law. This well-known guiding principal of the universe states that your braided reins will break just as the dressage judge rings her bell signaling

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# TACK MADNESS

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you to enter at A. By having a nice pile of spares we kid ourselves into believing that we are ready to deal with this disaster. Of course, the reality is that the spare reins are locked in the truck, which is parked 1287 meters from the aforementioned A. This gives your groom 60 seconds to run 2574 meters and replace the reins. Grooms should be fit and interval-trained.

The Murphy's Law syndrome accounts for the sale of an additional 12.3% of tack, for a reasonable total of 15.9%. What then, you ask, accounts for the remaining 84.1% of such purchases? The answer lies in the basic urge of humans to possess meaningful and enjoyable items which enrich their lives—otherwise known as toys. Consider the options open to eventers looking for new toys. Can we buy video games or cabbage patch dolls? Of course not! We can make one of four purchases:

- 1) A new farm or farm structure.
- 2) A new horse transportation vehicle.
- 3) A new horse.
- 4) Tack!

Gets pretty obvious doesn't it? The first three can destroy a budget for one or more lifetimes, leaving tack acquisition our favorite sport (next to eventing in general). We can then rationalize this purchase by saying that our event horse could finally do shoulder-in correctly, *if only* he had a) a new girth; b) a new bit; c) a new whip; ignoring what he really needs, which is d) a new rider.

The most dangerous manifestation of the AREA syndrome is undoubtedly the Mass Tack Frenzy. This bears a striking resemblance to a herd of lemmings, hurtling themselves into the Arctic Ocean. The build-up to a Mass Frenzy is fairly predictable. The weather is miserable and not remotely conducive to riding. Three-to-five eventers are gathered at the barn listlessly grooming their noble steeds. Suddenly one individual comes out with a seemingly innocent phrase, such as "I think I need a new salt block." Ears perk up as the predictable rejoinder comes: "Oh yeah? Where are you going to get one?" Now, salt blocks are available in every village and hamlet of the U.S., including New York City. This is where the Mass Frenzy reaches the critical stage, as eventer #1 usually replies, "I was thinking of driving over to Flugelheimer's Equestrian Emporium (FEE)."

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There are several things which will always be true about FEE. It will be at least fifty miles away from the barn and there will be numerous fast food restaurants on the route. One after another, the remaining victims of the Frenzy will begin to mumble, "Gee, I need some braiding rubber bands," or, "Boy, could I use a rhinestone-studded hoof pick." Faster than JJ Babu on steeplechase, the erstwhile moderately sane individuals are crammed into the nearest vehicle and motor towards the aforementioned bridle bazaar. At least one stop is made at a Burger Doodle where each participant inhales 6,000 plus calories, blowing months of diet and exercise in the bargain. Somehow the inner body knows that mega-nutrition is needed in the quest for tack.

Behold at last the long sought Flugelheimer's, noting that the parking lot is full—in fact you have to park a quarter mile away. The weather conditions that produce Mass Frenzy affect all eventers at the same time, so that roughly 10,000 souls cram into tack stores all across the country. It looks just like the secretary's booth when they post the cross-country scores—a seething mass of humanity. Notice the glazed look and trembling hands of persons who have ostensibly driven 50 miles to buy a salt block and are trying to pretend that this is normal behavior.

Now let us harken back to the brief shopping list assembled in the barn: a salt block, braiding rubber bands, and hoof pick. What, in fact, do our intrepid threesome acquire? One can of hoof dressing, a new bridle, two bits, a saddle cover, leather reins with stops, one fly strip, one whip, two books, a genuine sheepskin seat-saver, one pair of spurs, one set of stirrup leathers, two paste-wormers, and a box of horse treats. Note that people in the grip of Mass Tack Frenzy *never* buy what they set out to get. Even if they have the supreme will-power to try to buy it, the store will be out of stock.

Finally our party crams the goodies into the car and heads for home, unwinding along the way with another large order of fast food fries.

The Mass Frenzy tack attack is probably the most serious manifestation of the problem, but there are several other variations on the syndrome which merit intelligent discussion.

Monogram Mania has dominated the horse show set for years and is making inroads into eventing. I can plead almost total innocence of this problem. The only monogrammed saddle cloth I own has my horse's initials on it, not mine. Vicious rumor has it that I did this because my horse is both more intelligent and more handsome than I. I will not dignify this charge by repeating it. In

any case true Monogram Maniacs have an identity crisis which results in their having initials on every item of tack they own, save those which have a full-bore brass nameplate. Almost inevitably these individuals are also color-coordinated and blinding in their elegance. We are talking here about color-coordinated and initialed truck, trailer, bags for saddles, boots, coats, whips, tack box(es), brush box(es), the whole "nine yards." If anybody ever breeds a blue horse with white trim, they are going to get *very* rich. As I said, this particular disease has only a toe-hold in eventing, where the average competitor is likely to show up in a used U.S. Army pick-up, with a tired-looking trailer. Equipment is carried in open lattice crates, emblazoned with "Sealtest." All across this nation, a swarm of angry milkmen *bate* event riders. Six different colors of buckets follow in the unloading, along with the ubiquitous garbage bag. Horse show people don't generate garbage, or at least that's my presumption, since I've never seen a color-coordinated, initialed garbage bag. Despite the fact that eventers tend to be a bit earthy in this regard, we must remain on guard against an up-swing in the incidence of Monogram Mania. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

Tack Trunk Terror (TTT) is another form of AREAS that is fairly common and in extreme cases can lead to bizarre behavior. I am aware of one case of a young woman who used to sing to her tack trunk—but then again I attract strange friends. All of us must have several tack trunks to hold all that extra equipment we never use. Placing this equipment in a sturdy trunk enables us to feel good about having properly stored our valuable items. This is, of course, illusory, since we know all that stuff turns green within two minutes of the time we close the lid. Actually, my tack trunks aren't all that sturdy—in fact they are junk. Until very recently one of my trunks had a bright little sticker which said, "Bring me back to Portland in 1924." TTT reaches its peak in riders who purchase at least one each of those spiffy-looking jobs made of colored plexiglass, wood, and chrome, in stable colors with initials and maybe even a logo. I'd love to have a logo, but one that would be honest would probably be embarrassing (an illustration of a male rider falling off a horse). In any case the victim of TTT cannot rest until he or she owns the whole set of large, medium, and small trunks; bandage box, brush box, braiding box, bridle boards, and probably a small flag pole. I've totalled the cost of such a set-up and it exceeds what I paid for my horse. Fortunately this aspect of the AREA syndrome has passed me by—I don't even have an urge to slap a coat of paint on the old ones.

Another alarming trend in AREAS is the growth of fashionable attire. Until very recently everyone in our sport wore pretty much the same basic outfit: ordinary breeches, some kind of ratcatcher, stock, frock coat, and a polo shirt for cross-country. Now the magazines and catalogs are featuring designer shirts, styled breeches, and new jacket styles. All of these are modeled by gorgeous, well-scrubbed young women or men with the look of eagles. Now, people in our sport only look well-scrubbed in the morning. By the time they have mucked out, fed, brushed, braided, and walked the cross-country course, they tend to look a trifle worn, or in my case, downright filthy.

I think the male models are all supposed to look like fighter pilots or similar hotshots. My brother *is* a hotshot fighter pilot—and as much as I love him—he looks more like a fire hydrant than an eagle.

Truth in advertising should require that all super-fashionable riding attire be modeled by persons who have a) screwed in studs; b) had their horse rub his head on them; and c) rolled in the mud (preferably after taking a flying dive off a horse). This would enable the typical competitor to more correctly evaluate their final appearance in these splendid garments.

Further discussion of the AREAS problem would probably be highly valuable to the eventing community but unfortunately, I must cut this short. I've always wanted three-buckle field boots and I've got an appointment to be measured for them! □

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