

# Leather Forever

## *The argument for saddles of the traditional kind*

By Sheldon Brown

**R**evolutionary saddle designs come onto the market every year, and every year, touring cyclists are still best served by a technology that has not changed substantially in this century — the tensioned leather saddle.

From the dawn of two-wheeled travel, up through the early 1970s, virtually all good-quality bicycles came with leather saddles. In the early '70s, plastic saddles started to make major inroads, and today only a few top-end touring



PHOTO BY GREG SIPLIE

**A broken-in Brooks saddle is a thing of beauty, both to look at, and to ride.**

bikes come equipped with leather saddles. Does this mean that leather saddles are obsolete? Not at all. Leather saddles are no more obsolete than leather baseball gloves.

### Plastic vs Leather

Plastic saddles have four advantages over leather ones: 1) They are lighter. 2) They are weatherproof. 3) They do not require breaking in. 4) They are cheaper.

Leather saddles have only one advantage over plastic, but it is a big one. For many cyclists, they are much more comfortable.

A leather saddle, like a good pair of shoes or a baseball glove, softens with use, and molds itself to fit your shape. Whatever part of your rear end pushes hardest on the saddle causes the corresponding part of the saddle to soften and stretch to relieve the uneven pressure, until the saddle accommodates perfectly to your own particular tush.

Leather saddles are not for everyone. They are substantially heavier than synthetic saddles. A new leather saddle is quite hard and rigid, and it takes several hundred miles to break one in. Also, they require care, and can self-destruct if not properly maintained.

Most plastic saddles use closed-cell foam, sometimes called "gel," to provide some softness, but the foam and the plastic undercarriage of the saddle can only be shaped to fit an "average" bottom, not yours in particular. Closed-cell

foam is an excellent heat insulator, so this type of saddle is a particular problem in hot weather, because it holds heat and moisture.

Leather saddles, by contrast, are particularly good in hot weather, because they use no insulating foam, and can breathe. This makes them cooler and allows perspiration to evaporate through the saddle, so they are very much less likely to cause chafing and saddle sores.

In addition, when you sit on foam, the foam under your "sit bones" compresses right away, so the other foam on the seat winds up exerting uncomfortable pressure on your (ahem!) soft tissues. That's why better-quality plastic saddles have a depression or even a hole running along the centerline.

### Good Leather vs Bad Leather

Back when leather was the only game in town, good bikes came with good leather saddles, and cheap bikes came with cheap leather saddles. There is quite a difference. For one thing, good saddles are made of thick, high-quality leather. In addition, there is the question of grain. Leather, like wood, has a natural grain pattern to it. When saddle tops are to be cut out of a hide, the cutter has a choice. The cheap way is to get the largest number of saddle tops from a given hide with the least wastage of leather. The quality way is to cut the saddle tops in such a way that the grain runs straight down the middle of the saddle.

The cheap saddles that came on \$90 dollar bikes in the early '70s are no longer made, but their memory lingers on. Some of them could be broken in properly and actually gave a comfortable ride, but many just had the wrong grain, and went from bad to worse.

There used to be many brands of leather saddles, but two names in particular stood out for the highest quality: Brooks of England and Ideale of France. Now Brooks appears to be the only survivor.

### Who Needs a Leather Saddle?

Leather saddles are not for everyone, but in my opinion, they are the best choice for most touring cyclists. People who ride a lot in the rain without fenders should stick to plastic because excessive wetness is bad for leather. People who are unwilling to do routine maintenance should also stick to plastic, because leather does not thrive on neglect.

### Breaking in a leather saddle

Most of the cyclists on the road today became cyclists after the disappearance of the leather saddle as standard equipment on new bikes. Many others may have had a leather saddle on their first bikes, but never received any instruction in the proper care and break-in of a leather saddle. As a result, many otherwise-knowledgeable cyclists are woefully ignorant about leather saddles. They have heard that a well broken-in leather saddle is more comfortable than a plastic one, but they have an exaggerated idea of how difficult and painful it is to break one in.

The easiest and fastest method to break in a new saddle is with a liquid leather dressing, such as neatsfoot oil, Lexol, seal oil (a French favorite) or baseball glove oil. These

products are available from shoe stores and sporting-goods stores. There are probably lots of other liquid oils that would work as well. RAAM pioneer Lon Haldeman uses SAE 30 motor oil, but his saddles tend to wear out after only 300,000 miles or so (according to *Cyclist Magazine*). Paste or wax-type leather dressings, such as Brooks Proofide, Sno-Seal, and saddle soap will work, but it takes much, much longer to break in a saddle that way.

Most leather saddles are dyed black. Oiling the saddle will partially dissolve the dye, which will stain on your clothes — which is why cycling shorts are black. No problem. Wear light colors at your own risk! If you must wear day-glo pink shorts, put a seat cover on the saddle.

Light-colored leather saddles, such as the Brooks "Honey" models, will be darkened by any treatment you apply.

Breaking in a leather saddle is not an exact science, and there are those who claim that some of the products I've listed are harmful to leather. If absolute safety is your primary concern, using Brooks Proofide, according to the directions provided, is probably the safest approach ... but you may find that the break-in period is unnecessarily long with this approach.

The worst thing you can do is to neglect the saddle and allow it to dry out and crack. If a leather saddle is not oiled, and especially if it is allowed to get wet repeatedly, perhaps even ridden while soaked, it will eventually crack and disintegrate.

### **Tension Adjustment**

Most leather saddles have a tension-adjusting nut located under the nose of the saddle. Fortunately, this nut usually requires a special wrench, so most people leave it alone. In almost every case that I know of where someone has tried to adjust the tension with this nut, the saddle has been ruined. My advice is to leave it alone.

If a leather saddle gradually becomes too soft and too wide after many thousands of miles, it is sometimes useful to punch a few holes in the bottoms of the side flaps and lace them together under the saddle frame.

This allows the width and firmness of the saddle to be adjusted to the rider's taste. Some older models came with a row of holes along the lower edge of the side flaps, for this very purpose.

I realize that this sounds like a lot of trouble, but most cyclists who take the trouble to ride a leather saddle find it well worthwhile in the end. ●

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