

Staying Warm on Winter Trails

Q. It's not technically freezing where I live but sometimes it's really cold in the winter, even 45 degrees feels too cold to me and in March when it's wet even 55 feels cold. I want to ride trails instead of going around the corral getting nowhere. Need ideas how to stay really warm for a two- or four-hour trail ride depending which loop I take. Last year somebody told me to buy moon boots, they're fine for warm but I can hardly get my feet in my stirrups and if I can I can't get them out again! My back is bad and when it's cold my whole body gets stiff. My wife says "layer your clothes" but by the time I've got an undershirt, a shirt, a couple of sweaters and a coat on, I can't move my arms real well. Advice needed!

A. Winter trail-riding can be a lot of fun if you've got enough useful ways to fight the cold.

Safety first! You are wise to want to avoid getting your feet stuck in your stirrups – that's horribly dangerous. Larger stirrups – really large ones – are the obvious option, but don't just run out and buy a wider pair. If you're wearing moon boots, you'll need really wide stirrups, so look at *hunting stirrups* designed to be used with big heavy boots. If your local tack store doesn't have them, try Cabela's or Valley Vet Supply.

Wear your moon boots to the tack store so that you can be sure that you'll be able to get your feet in and out of your stirrups easily. When moon boots are too much and ordinary everyday boots aren't quite enough, you can opt for either electric socks (check to be sure that the batteries will last long enough for you to get home after that four-hour ride) or tapaderos. Tapaderos will cut the wind; the air space they create also helps retain warmth.

You're right about the effects of a cold back! Yes, do think about layering your winter clothing (your wife's advice is good), but you probably don't need five layers. If you choose your layers well, you'll probably be quite warm and comfortable wearing *one* shirt and *one* vest under *one* top layer (long jacket or duster). Starting at the bottom, polarfleece shirts are very warm and comfortable. Your choice of vest is up to you – a good down vest will keep your torso warm, as will a good Thinsulate vest – but here's one you may not have heard of: The longear battery powered Heating Vest from Techniche.

I've been using this for the last year or so, and it's really quite impressive whether I'm riding or teaching or just digging my way through the snowdrifts between the house and the (unheated) barn. The last time I had tried on a "heated vest," many years ago, the vest itself hadn't been particularly comfortable, the "heat" was confined to a few specific spots, none of which were where I wanted them to be, in the middle of my back. The batteries didn't last so the heat was gone in an hour or

so – that’s not much help if you still have several lessons to teach in a cold arena, or if you’re out on a trail several miles from home.

This new Techniche heated vest is comfortable and warm on its own, and the heat is actually under your control – one of the pockets contains a temperature controller that lets you choose your own setting. Naturally I had to set it on the highest possible temperature, just to see how long it would last – I got almost 5 hours at top heat, and was actually too warm at times. I lent the vest to a friend who just wanted to be moderately warm; on the middle settings, the heat lasted for 10 hours. Apparently the lowest setting will provide mild warmth for a full 12 hours, but I haven’t tried that one yet. If you do, please report back!

A couple of months ago during a really cold snap, I made the mistake of wearing this vest when I was cleaning stalls. By the time I finished cleaning the last stall, I was sorry – my once-black vest was dusty brown. I knew that it was theoretically possible to wash the vest, but that was going to involve removing all the heating elements, battery, and controller... and then putting them back into the correct places once the vest was clean and dry. Guess what? It’s not difficult, even though I am notoriously bad at this sort of task. I still don’t advise cleaning stalls in this vest, though – at least put something on over it, even if it’s just an old flannel shirt.

It’s actually practical for riding, as the temperature controller fits into the upper left pocket. That makes it reasonably accessible even when you’re on a horse (but since you’ll have to open your overcoat, I advise you to get out of the wind, or at least turn your back to it, before you make temperature adjustments). One of my students asked her husband for the same vest for Christmas, and got it – in fact, he bought one for her and one for himself. He’s not a rider, much less a trail rider – he likes to watch sports, and he thought the design was perfect for cold-day football games. He wears a cowboy-style oilskin duster over his vest and says he’s perfectly warm all the time – you could wear the same thing. Outback Trading Company makes good ones, and most tack stores carry them.

I’m very fond of polarfleece generally, in all its forms – socks, gloves, scarves, hats, hoods... all of those things, plus the nifty little heating packets that hunters use, will help keep you warm when you’re sick of the corral and determined to get out on the trails. Congratulations on your determination, and enjoy your cold-weather trail riding!

Jessica Jahiel

Horseback Magazine, Texas