

## Machine Washing Leather Chaps

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OLDWICK, NJ Leather chaps become one of your most personal garments. When new, they can be stiff, ornery, too tight in some spots, not tight enough in others. They wrinkle and bite flesh in some places, cut off the circulation in others. Over time, however, they stretch and soften. They mold to your unique anatomy and become so individual that no one else can wear them. Over time, they also accumulate a patina of grime. Chaps are working garments. They get splattered with mud, marinated in sweat, and rub up against their share of manure, dust, chaff, and other dirty debris commonly found around barns. Riders might be scrupulous about wearing clean jeans and shirts, but until recently, there wasn't much they could do about their chaps. Some have tried washing chaps but the only laundry products available for leather to date have been detergent type cleaners which remove dirt but do not replace the lubricating oils in the leather's inner corium. The leather dries stiff and is actually weakened by the cleaning process. The only alternative has been to let the chaps become starched with sweat and grunge until the accumulated dirt destroyed the leather from the inside out. Then you just had to grit your teeth and go through the expense and agony of breaking in a new pair. Thanks to the molecular synergy between two recently developed companion leather care products, however, riders can now safely wash suede or smooth-leather chaps in their home washing machine and recondition the leather at the same time. The cleaner works during the wash cycle to deep clean dirt and leave leather fibers with a negative ionic charge that attracts the more positively charged conditioning dressing during the rinse cycle. Riders can now throw grungy, hardworking leathers like chaps, half chaps, leather-seated breeches, and sheepskin saddle pads in their washing machine and pull them out cleaned, softened and suppled.

Here are three easy steps for cleaning chaps:

**PREPARATION:** Brush off surface dirt. Close zippers to protect both leather surfaces and the washing machine tub finish from scratches. Turn smooth leather chaps inside out to protect their outer surface from abrasion by the washing machine's agitator. As with other garments, the stability of dyes can vary from manufacturer to manufacturer. Wash light and dark chaps separately. If you are washing two-toned chaps or mixing colors, test dye color fastness in an inconspicuous spot.

**WASHING:** For lighter colors, set the washing machine for a small load on the permanent press cycle (warm water wash, cold water rinse). For darker colors, use the delicate cycle (cold water wash and rinse). Add the cleaner while the tub is filling with water. Put the dressing in your washing machine's rinse cycle dispenser. Then dunk those chaps in.

**DRYING:** Remove the damp chaps, unzip zippers, and lay the chaps flat to air dry away from heat or direct sun which can shrink leather fibers.

If your washing machine does not have a separate rinse cycle dispenser and you don't want to baby sit your wash load, you can sponge the dressing onto the wet leather before leaving it to dry.

Adding a conditioning dressing immediately after washing helps enhance leather color and prevent fading. Depending on the quality of the leather and the manufacturing process that created it, however, some dyes may bleed. If you are washing fancy two-toned show chaps, be sure to use cold water cycles and test dye stability first by sponging a dilution of the cleaner in water in an inconspicuous area of each color to see if the dyes move.

Leather should never be dried in the heat of a clothes dryer but tumbling thick sheepskin pads for a short period using the "air fluff" setting helps remove excess moisture so the pads will dry more quickly.

While machine washing is fine for "working leathers" like chaps, sheepskin saddle pads and leather-trimmed riding breeches designed for tough uses, it is not recommended for most high fashion leather garments. Their lighter-weight threads and fancy buttons may not stand up to the machine's agitator. Lightweight garment linings may tear along seam lines. Working cowboys may view a pair of stained, beat up chaps as a status symbol to be preserved in their current state. For the rest of us, however, there's no more excuse for grungy chaps, mud-encrusted half chaps, or matted sheepskin pads. Modern chemistry now makes throwing them in the machine as easy as washing your jeans.

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