

Hitches, Knots and Slings – OH MY!

Several members of the SBBCH got together this weekend for a mini-pack session of sorts. Janine and I expressed an interest in learning more about proper packing techniques and engaged the assistance of Jake Lemon and Ellen Knapp, who agreed to take time out of their busy schedules to demonstrating their personal packing techniques.

Jake felt that if we were going to learn this thing the right way, it would be best to learn on our own animals with our own gear. With this philosophy in mind, I loaded Jack and Annie and drove to Jakes in Emmett. Annie has come a long way considering her past, but she is still a bit skittish. I brought Jack along in hopes the presence of “her horse” would help to calm her.



I pulled into Jakes a little after noon to find the rest of the crew had arrived. I could not blame my bad sense of direction for my tardiness this time. This time, I would blame Annie. She is not the easiest critter to catch when she does not want to be caught. Yeah, I’ve read the books on how to catch the hard to catch mule –Annie, however, has not.



We immediately began learning how to properly fold a top pack using a big square piece of canvas called a “mantee.” I do not know where the word “mantee” comes from. It sounds like it could be a sea anemone; or perhaps the latest European fashion in men’s facial hair. I think it more resembled a tortilla shell. By the time you wrap up all your gear for the top pack, you have a fairly nice simulation of a neatly wrapped, giant burrito. Then

again, I was hungry and everything was starting to look like a giant burrito. I had little problem summoning the skills necessary to wrap the top pack. I grew up behind a meat counter in my dad’s grocery store. Dad was right after all...wrapping countless one-pound packages of hamburger finally paid off.

The sling rope installation proved to be more difficult. I tried to focus...really I did. “The running lead goes from back to front, always toward the animal – due east and just north of the setting sun. Unless it’s Tuesday – in which case you do the opposite.” What are the sling ropes for again? Securing the mantee? I thought the mantee rope was for securing the mantee. Oh, wait...I get it – the sling ropes secure the top pack, and the mantee rope secures the mantee itself...which looks like a neatly wrapped burrito. Did anybody bring food?”



We were then taught how to tie the knot. (There is a whole lot I could do with that previous sentence; however, in an attempt to suppress further digressions, I will try to remain focused.) Depending on who you ask, we would either be tying a half-hitch, a slip knot, or a packer's do-hickey. I may have made that last one up. Like most things in life, there are more ways than one to skin a cat. Tying knots falls into this theory. In the end, I believe Ellen's do-hickey and Jake's thingamajig resulted in the same knot being secured by throwing on a universally agreed upon "keeper loop."

I firmly believe both Ellen and Jake have been school teachers in a previous life. Like many good teachers, both insisted Janine and I mimic what we had been shown. Undoubtedly, Janine recognized the same deer in the headlights look in me, as I in her. If there's one thing I can be proud of, it's my lightning fast hands. My plan was to toss around two strands of rope with such speed and agility that neither Jake nor Ellen would be able to see that I had just tied a wad of shit. Like hands of a seasoned calf-roper, strands of twine flew through deft fingers of raw speed. I covered up the entire mess with an artfully executed keeper loop. Jake commented that it looked like I had that one down. I had successfully baffled them with bullshit.



Did I mention that all the while we are doing this on my skittish mule? Annie did remarkably well, in my opinion; in truth, I may be the only one who holds that opinion. I knew what it took for Annie to stand there while four people came at her from all directions with 30' ropes, saddles, tack and a giant mule-eating burrito. Ellen had packed Annie before during our all-girls pack trip into the Frank Church. She pays no attention to Annie's skittish ways and in turn, Annie seems to

respect her for it. Annie danced around from time to time, but never offered to kick or bite anyone's arm off. That was more than I could say for myself – I was hungry enough to gnaw off my own arm.

Ellen and Jake continued to teach Janine and I some of the basic concepts of packing. While their techniques may differ, both offered invaluable insight. Ellen has a knack for using tips and tricks designed to make the process easier for those of us lacking monkey-strength. Jake's more purist approach offered ideas of how a person might tailor his techniques to our own system. I'm not so sure they didn't learn a little from each other as well.

I found the most useful information concerned proper positioning of the saddle and gear. I had placed the sawbucks too far forward and probably caused Annie considerable discomfort. Maybe that explains, in part, why she seems to barely tolerate me at times. Annie is smart – much smarter than this human, and I have no doubt she knows more about packing than I'll learn in a lifetime. I often feel inadequate in her presence.



Later, Jake brought out Jed, his pack mule, and demonstrated more of his system and technique for packing. Impressive is an understatement. Jake has designed and built most of the entire system into a work of art.

Janine and Ellen headed for home while Jake continued to work on adjusting Annie's tack until dark. Jack, in the meantime, had been waiting patiently tied close by. His patience had pretty much run its course and he started to paw and chew on the metal fence. I would not fault him – we had been at it for over seven hours. A few more minutes and I may have tried out that fence myself. Jake finished making adjustments to one side and made sure I knew enough to copy his work for the other side.

With Jack and Annie loaded, I headed home with a head full of new information and ideas I hoped would sink in before it fell out both ears. Janine had said if you ask one hundred packers the proper way to pack, you will get one hundred different answers. No doubt that holds true for anything that combines art with science, and I believe such a combination exists in packing.

The microwave oven dinged with the promise of dinner. I pulled a plate from the oven consisting of two steaming and perfectly folded bean burritos that would have made Jake and Ellen proud.

