

LEATHER CARE



by E. Don Smith

LEATHER CAN BE anything from a fashion statement to serious safety equipment that provides essential protection in the event of a spill. And despite the wide array of synthetic materials that have been developed for protective gear, racing-weight leather is still the most abrasion resistant material you can wear to protect your own hide from injury. And in addition to its durability, leather is also one of the most luxurious materials that Mother Nature has given to us. The weight, the feel and the aroma of leather make it uniquely satisfying to wear.

Whether you have a fancy one-piece racing suit or a combination of jacket, boots, pants and gloves, leather is also expensive and worth taking care of so as to extend its life as long as possible.

What is Leather Anyway?

Before we talk about how to care for leather, we first need to understand exactly what it is. The term leather is commonly used as a broad category of processed animal hides. But there are actually many types of leathers from many different sources. Below is a common list of these materials

and their origins. Each has advantages and disadvantages related to its use in motorcycle garments.

Buffalo hide= Skin from buffalo or water buffalo

Buckskin= Deer and elk skin

Calfskin= Skin from immature cattle

Cowhide= Skin from mature female bovines

Goatskin= Skin from mature goats

Horsehide= Skin from a horse

Lambskin= Skin from lambs

Pigskin= Skin from pigs or hogs

Sheepskin= Skin from a mature sheep

In addition to the various types, there are just as many ways to treat and finish these hides, which will have an effect on the final properties of the product. See Fred Rau's article in the October '03 MCN "How To Buy A Motorcycle Jacket," for a more detailed explanation of these processing methods.

What the Experts Say

Our research has revealed, much to our surprise, that many of the products sold for leather care on the market today are not at all ideal. However, their brochures sound

convincing, and as uninformed consumers we tend to buy the products without question. So don't be surprised if what we are about to tell you goes against almost everything you have ever heard or read about leather care. Brace yourself to learn some new tricks.

If you look at the typical car care center or furniture dealer that sells leather care products, you are likely to be as mystified as we were at the dizzying array of creams and potions that are sold to clean and care for your leather garments. After interviewing many people in the motorcycle garment business, and often receiving a different opinion from each of them, we decided we needed an unbiased source of information. So we turned to the Leather Apparel Association (LAA), an industry group that was founded by 40 retailers, tanners, producers and cleaners in 1990. They currently have more than 100 members, and one of their goals is to provide an authoritative source of information related to leather and its use and care. They also maintain an approved list of leather cleaners throughout the United States, which can be found on their website at www.leatherassociation.com.