



Finishing Edges

.....by Bob Park

I am frequently asked about my process for finishing edges. It has evolved over the years as new products and tools have become available. Currently I use saddle soap and heavy canvas for burnishing. It is a process that has been a standard in saddle shops all over the country, for years. The following is my adaptation and I hope you find it useful.

1) SAND EDGES – I use a stationary belt sander with a 150 grit belt, sanding against the direction of travel. An option would be to use the small sanding drums which can be used with a drill motor. This will insure that all the layers of leather are even and square and that any residual glues or finishes have been removed.

2) EDGING – Use an edger to remove the corners on the edge of the leather. The size and type edger used is dictated by leather thickness and personal preference regarding the final profile of the edge. Using a good quality, sharp edger makes a nice smooth cut. Edging can be done with cased or dry leather.

3) WET & SOAP – Wet the edge of the leather using a sponge or piece of trimmed wool skin. Then rub Fiebings glycerin bar soap very well into the leather, resulting in a slick rounded edge.

Bees wax or Gum Tragacanth can be substituted for the saddle soap at this point, and they will produce good results, however both will prevent spirit dyes from penetrating the leather and so I don't use either of them.

4) BURNISH – I burnish with heavy canvas saturated with Fiebings yellow paste saddle soap. Canvas can be found at tent/awning shops or fabric supply stores. Denim will work also, but I prefer the canvas. Burnishing is accomplished by briskly rubbing the canvas against the edge of the belt until the edge is smooth. Use some elbow grease...you will feel the heat from the friction.

I use canvas wrapped around a motorized wood burnishing wheel which speeds up the process. I have found that when burnishing mechanically, it is especially important to keep the canvas saturated with yellow soap. This seems to help keep the friction created between the canvas and the leather under control. Be careful not to over-burnish, which will result in a rough edge.

5) DYE – At this point, dye the edge. I prefer spirit dyes as they are absorbed into the leather rather than bonding to the outside, like edge paint. Dyeing at this stage will produce a very neat, clean dye line as the leather is smooth and the fibers are tightly bonded together. It is very difficult to get a clean straight dye line before the edge is burnished when using spirit or oil based dyes. When the dye has dried completely use a clean cloth to rub the edge removing any residual dye and to determine if a second coat is necessary (old t-shirts are great for this).

Sometimes the addition of the dye will reveal imperfections in the burnished edge. A hand burnisher or rub stick is handy to do any required touch-ups. If any re-dyeing is necessary be sure to allow those areas to dry completely before proceeding.

6) POLISH – At this point I apply paraffin to the edge of the belt and burnish again. Denim works well here if burnishing by hand. I burnish mechanically with a soft sanding drum wrapped with cordura nylon, generously impregnated with paraffin. Polish to a high luster with a soft dry cloth.

7) FINISH – After the edges are polished, apply the final finish. I happen to like Neat-Lac and apply it sparingly in light coats.

Well, there it is! These are the steps that I follow to produce a highly polished finished edge. A finely finished edge will make any project stand out from the rest. I hope this helps you on your next project.

