



SPURS

When we first think of spurs, we don't imagine them as tools, but tools they are. First used by the Greeks and Etruscans in the second century B.C.E., all horsemen from the Romans, the Mongols, and the Moors to the French, the British and the Spanish used spurs as tools to assist in guiding their horses. Spurs were used especially when a rider's hands were occupied with weapons or other equipment. For the better part of their existence, spurs have been associated with the upper classes.

From the times of Ancient Rome, owning a horse has been an expensive proposition. Until modern times, owning a horse was restricted to the wealthy because of the expenses (feed, shelter, medical attention) involved in their care. The Romans created a special privileged class, the Equestrians, to recognize the contributions of these horse-owning aristocrats. In the Middle Ages, the aristocracy was the only group that could afford horses. One of the ways in which aristocrats distinguished themselves from the rest of society, and each other, was through the spurs they wore. Lords and knights wore golden spurs. Squires, knights in training, wore silver spurs. When a squire had acquired the necessary combat skills and weaponry, it was said that he "had won his spurs" and he was awarded a "knighthood." Part of the knighthood ceremony involved removing his silver spurs and replacing them with gilded (golden) spurs. Since that time, when someone has distinguished himself/herself, we say they have "won their spurs."

There are many kinds and styles of spurs. There are cavalry spurs, ceremonial spurs, dressage spurs and many others. Spur designs are not all the same and depend principally upon the purpose for which it will be used. Historically, the first spurs had a yoke and an extended shank with a sharp point at the end. Sometime in the 13th century, horsemen and blacksmiths in France introduced the rowel. From there, the rowel spread to Britain, Germany and Spain. The Spanish conquistadors introduced both spurs with rowels and horses when they came to the Western Hemisphere in the 15th century. Because New Spain provided great wealth for the Iberian Peninsula, Spanish aristocrats who came as colonists and administrators began to flaunt their wealth through a demonstration of affluence. One way was to design and wear elaborately decorated spurs. The more elaborate the decoration, the wealthier the wearer. These kinds of spurs evolved into the Western Spur with which we are most familiar today.

Since the middle of the 19th century, western spurs have been a standard piece of cowboy equipment. There are three basic parts of a western spur: the yoke, the shank and the rowel. The yoke is the rounded part that wraps around the heel of the boot. The shank extends from the back of the yoke. The rowel is a revolving wheel with radiating points at the end of the shank. The rowel is the part of the spur that touches the horse. Spurs are usually attached to boots by a leather strap that passes over the arch of the foot, which then fastens to metal "buttons" on the side of the yoke. A chain or leather thong passes under the boot's arch in front of the heel in order to secure the spur from slipping or



falling off. Cowboy spurs generally have rowels, however, other professions have different designs.

Professional equestrians, those who participate in dressage, use a “Prince of Wales” spur, which has a short blunt shank and no rowels. Cavalrymen in the US Army possess ornamental spurs that have a small revolving disk at the end of the shank rather than rowels. Recreational riders often use a “Waterford Spur” that has a small metal ball attached at the end of the shank.

Spurs for western riding, western spurs, tend to be heavier, often decorated, and have rowels that rotate. The shank of western spurs is usually longer while the rowel is usually of larger diameter. Western spurs are often decorated. A “half-mounted” spur is decorated on one side only. A “full” or “double-mounted” spur is decorated on both sides (inside and outside of the yoke) with images and designs.

Spurs come in a variety of styles that have evolved to match the purposes for which they are intended. Mostly, we associate spurs with cowboys and the American West. Regardless of the design, ornamentation or person wearing them, spurs remain tools to help riders guide their mounts with ease.