

# YOU & YOUR GEAR

## BREAKING IN BOOTS

By Seth Masia

I can't resist new footgear. At any given moment during the past 10 years, I've probably owned a dozen pairs of shoes: hiking and climbing boots, touring shoes, ski boots, tennis shoes, spikes, deck shoes, high-top mud boots, and on and on. Consequently, at any given moment during the past 10 years, the chances have been better than even that I was breaking in a pair of boots. Blisters are the price of a foot fetish. I hereby pass on to you what I have learned about breaking in and taking care of new boots.

Get a boot that fits. If you can't (and you probably won't) find one that feels like part of your foot from the first, it's better to settle for one just a bit narrow than just a bit wide. Yes, you can pad out a big boot with an extra pair of socks or an insole, but better to cramp a little until the leather stretches out than to slide around in blister-building agony in boots that are only going to grow steadily larger.

You can live with a boot that's a bit narrow, but length is all-important. Going sharply uphill or down in boots that are too long destroys either your heels or the fronts of your ankles, and going downhill in boots that are too short leaves you toeless. Narrow boots, on the other hand, will eventually stretch out.

Find out whether the boots are of chrome-tanned or oil-tanned leather. The salesman should know this. If he doesn't, suspect that his fitting recommendations might not be based on full information. If you can get a copy of the manufacturer's catalog, check out the tanning process there. If the boots are oil-tanned, buy some neat's-foot oil or boot grease and rub it liberally into the leather. Give it a good workout; pretend you're a 10-year-old softening up his first good baseball glove. You're doing the same thing: softening and waterproofing the leather so it will

break into your foot more easily.

If the leather is chrome-tanned, stay away from oils. Oil will seal the pores in the leather and prevent it from breathing — which means sweaty feet will get sweeter instead of gradually drying as you walk. Instead, use one of the silicone waxes, such as Sno-seal. You can use Sno-seal just like neat's-foot oil by melting it in its can over a low flame and painting it on with a rag, then rubbing it into the leather with your fingers.

When the leather is well-worked, put the boots on and go walking. Pick an easy trail or wear them around town for a couple of days. You can count on developing tender spots or blisters the first time out, so you don't want to be far from home or transportation at the end of your walk. Give your feet a day or so to heal, then try walking again. The boots should feel much better the second time around, especially if you've given them another good rubbing in the interim. If they haven't improved, don't suffer any longer. Go to extreme measures.

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I've heard some crackpot schemes for breaking in boots painlessly. A West Virginia lad (my brother) says, “Throw 'em in a barrel of oil. Neat's-foot oil is great, but expensive. Clean motor oil is just as good. Let them soak a few days and you'll have the best boots in the world.” Where can a child of my parents have picked up such nonsense? That treatment will ruin chrome-tanned leather, rot Vibram soles (any petroleum product will harm rubber) and may damage natural-fiber stitching.

Many old-timers say, “Lace them up and sit with your feet in a tub of hot water. Soak them good and then go walking.” We beg to differ. Soaking the outsides of the boots can serve no useful purpose. Rapid drying of soaked leather leads to hardening, cracking and shrinking; also to popped stitches and warped soles. Since the outside surface of the boot is what dries fastest, you want to treat it most gently. My preferred system is to soak just the inside of the boot. Harvey Manning concurs with this in his book *Backpacking: One Step at a Time*.

Run hot water into the kitchen sink. When it's almost too hot to hold your hand in, quickly fill one boot, then the other, pour out the first boot, pour out the second, and put them on. Go walking and walk until the boots are dry. *Do not* soak the boots in a tub. By soaking

only the insides of the boots, you're doing what your own perspiration would naturally do over a longer period of time. Walking the shoes dry will work the moisture through all the layers of leather gradually and dry them gently and naturally.

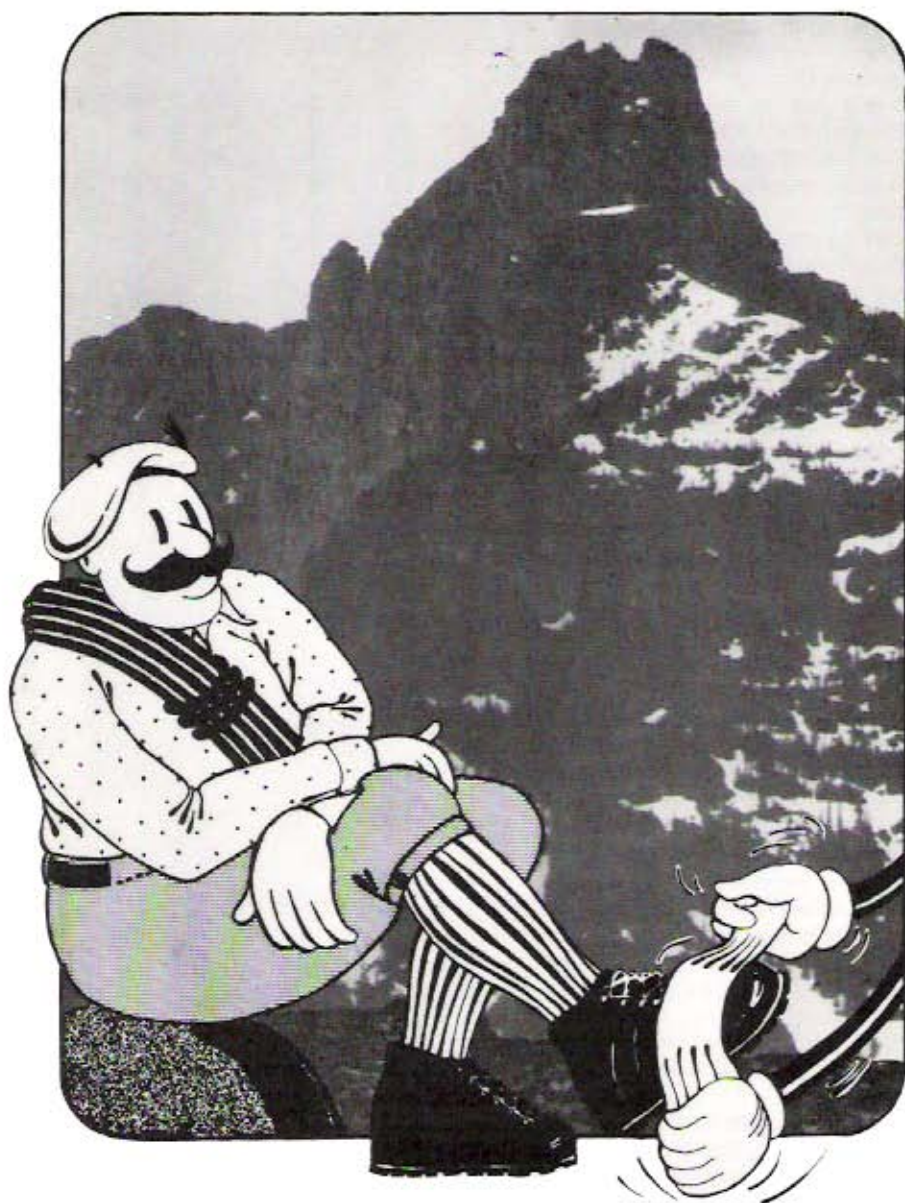
When the boots have dried, they should be completely broken in or nearly so. If not, resign yourself to suffer with them. Now you can embark on a regular program of boot care. I follow this drill and it seems to keep all kinds of leather boots in decent shape. Back home at the end of the day (or the end of a trip) I take the boots off and brush the mud from them. If they are very wet and dirty, I sponge them quickly. When the leather and the welt are both fairly clean, I *clamp them in a ski-boot carrier* and put them in a cool place to dry gradually. When the leather is dry, I give it a good rubdown with Sno-seal. If the boots are soaking wet, I stuff them with crumpled newspaper while they dry.

Don't overoil your boots. After the initial breaking-in ceremony, further oiling will only hasten the ultimate soft collapse of the leather. Use a good silicone wax instead. Exception: *Do* oil them after every winter wearing, or you will be running the risk of frozen feet.

On the trail, I carry neither ski-boot tree, nor brush, nor sponge. I do carry toilet paper, which serves in place of the latter two items and in place of overnight newspaper stuffing.

The most important point: Avoid heat. Drying boots by the fire, under the stove, on top of or beneath the radiator, or even in a hot attic invites trouble: shrunken cracked leather, burst seams, broken welts. Boots should dry at no higher than room temperature, although body temperature won't hurt if you're sufficiently fanatical to brood them.

The time will come when no lugs remain on your Vibram heels. The local specialty shop should have the address of a local shoemaker who can replace Vibram soles and heels. Nowadays that operation can run anywhere from \$10 to \$25, with \$15 the most typical rate. The shoemaker may want a deposit before he'll let you leave your boots with him. My experience with replaced soles has been pretty good. If anything, the freshly glued sole-to-midsole laminations appear to last longer than the original factory laminations. It could be that the local fellows take a little more pride in their work than do the factory gnomes. If you can't find a local shoemaker to do the work, write to the boot distributor. He'll be able to recommend a shop you can mail the boots to.



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One thing to be careful of: If the soles are so worn that the mid-sole is damaged, it may require replacement along with the rubber outsole. Make sure your new mid-sole matches the old one in outline or else the freshly sewn boot may be slightly longer, shorter, wider or narrower than it used to be.

Lace hooks also need replacing now and again. They get battered against rocks, bend, and break off. Any local

shoe-repair service can replace them, or, if you've a mind to, you can do it yourself. Buy the bits and pieces from the shoemaker or at a findings shop (many leathershops carry them) and supply yourself with an awl, a hammer and a smooth round rock. A pair of pliers and a wire cutter will be useful for removing vestiges of the old hook. The new hook comes in two or three pieces: an inner rivet-half, an outer rivet-half and the hook itself. Often the hook is part of the outer rivet-half. With the awl, enlarge the original rivet hole to take the new rivet. (You may have to put a new hole in the lining leather.) Place the inner rivet-half through the hole from the inside, place the rock inside the shoe as an anvil, slip the outer parts over the inner half, strike sharply a couple of times with your hammer, and voila! ♣

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