

# Beautiful Braids Are Within Your Reach

*Just remember the simple mantra “practice makes perfect” and you’re on the right track.*

*Molly Sorge*

*(Photos by Sara Lieser)*

*You might have had the nightmare. You sit atop your perfectly gleaming, dappled horse. You’re wearing the latest fashion, and have schooled to the point where every step is perfection. There’s only one problem. Your horse’s mane looks like a family of mice nested in it. Fuzzy, sticking-up braids might be easy to grab over a fence, but they don’t do much to enhance your horse’s appearance.*

*Perfect braids put the finishing touch on turn-out. And*

*while the process of twisting your horse’s hair into intricate knots might seem mysterious, it’s really not hard. All you need is the proper technique and lots of practice.*

*Practice is the key to figuring out just how to braid and tie up the braids and getting a feel for what works for you. The following are a few pointers about basic technique, but everyone has a system and variations that works for them.*

## The tools you’ll need for braiding:



***Clockwise from left: yarn, cut into 2' lengths, for hunter braids and tails; braiding thread and a large, blunt craft needle for button braids; a pulling comb; a hair clip; small scissors; a pull-through. Your pull-through can be a home-made loop of wire, or a latch-hook tool as well.***

**Mane Pulling**

Just as an artist can't paint without the proper canvas, a braider can't create perfect braids without a properly pulled mane.

Don't wait for the night before your big show to pull your horse's foot-long mane into submission—work on it gradually, pulling a little bit each day to achieve the length and fullness you want.

As a general rule, your horse's mane should be about 4" long, or as long as the width of your hand. If your horse has a very thick mane, it will be harder to braid when it's very short, so leave it a tad longer.

**Prepare The Mane**

Gather your tools (mane comb, pull-through, needle, scissors, and hair clip) and yarn or thread together. If you're putting in button braids, you'll

use a large, blunt craft needle and thin waxed braiding thread to tie up your braids.

If you're putting in hunter-type braids, you'll use pre-cut sections of yarn, about 2' long. The easiest way to measure and cut them is to loop the yarn around your hand and elbow lots of times, and then cut them once to make individual strands. You'll also want something to stand on—a small step ladder is best, but a wash bucket works as well.

With your horse standing cross-tied or tied in a well-lit, safe area, comb his mane out. You want to have his mane clean, but don't wash it just before you braid—squeaky-clean hair is hard to hold. A few days' dirt (but not mud!) will make it easier to hold. Wet the mane with a stiff brush or sponge until it's just damp. If you want to use a spray meant to prepare the hair for braiding—such as Quic-Braid—feel free.

**BUTTON BRAIDS**

*Button braids—appropriate for eventing, jumpers and dressage—are quick and easy, and they make any neck look elegant.*

*You can choose to do many smaller braids, which make a short or thick neck look longer—or do fewer and larger braids, which can make a longer neck look better. Experiment with what looks best on your horse.*



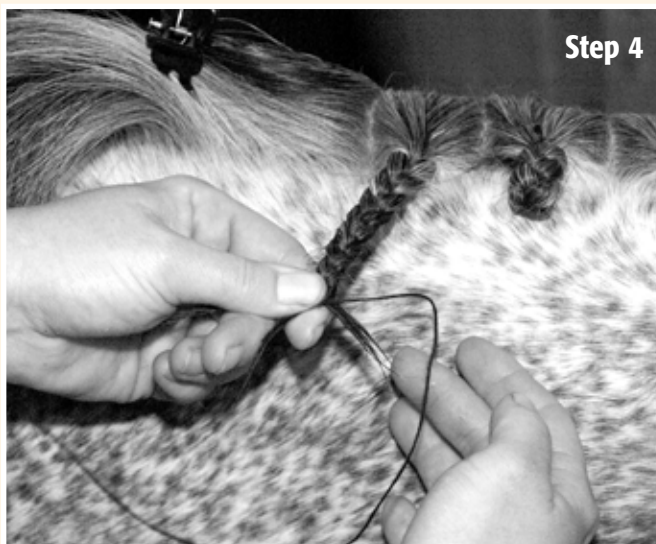
Starting at the top of your horse's mane, separate a section of mane, about 2" wide. Comb the remaining hair away from the section, down the neck, and secure it out of the way with a hair clip. Have about a three-foot length of braiding thread cut and threaded into your needle, and hold the needle in your mouth or tucked into your sleeve. Have more thread cut and ready to use.

One of the most important aspects of braiding is your sizing of sections to braid. For a thick mane, obviously you'll need to braid a smaller section of hair. And thin manes will have to be gathered into a larger section. The key is to have the same amount of hair in each section—remember that your horse's mane is thinner at the top and bottom, and thicker in the middle. Therefore, you will usually need to narrow your sections slightly toward the middle of the neck, then widen them again toward the bottom.

The trick is to feel as if you have the same amount of hair in your hand to braid each time. Every braid should look the same, so they should be the same size. Of course, once the hair starts to really thin out toward the bottom of the neck, the braids will be smaller.

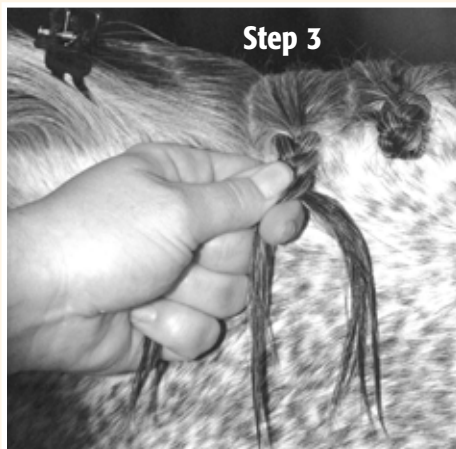


Divide your section to braid into three even sections. Make sure that the part in the hair between the sections is straight, and perpendicular to the mane—crooked or slanting parts will make your braids twist or slant.



Braid to almost the bottom of the hair. Leave about 1" tails, and hold them in your left hand. You should aim to have the same number of braiding twists in each braid, to make them the same length, so it might help to count these.

Try to end with the two thinnest sections of hair to the right and in the center. With your right hand, lay the tail end of your thread over two of the sections of hair. The very tail end should lie with the center section, and then the remaining should hang with the section to the right. Continue braiding to just before the end of the hair, incorporating the thread into the braid.



Braid evenly down the section of hair, pulling equally tightly on each side as you go, and keep your hands low on the neck. Don't pull the braid up away from the neck. Make sure to keep the braid tight.





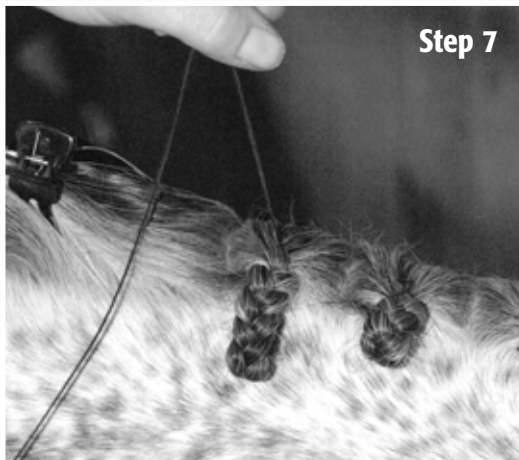
**Step 5**

Hold the end of the braid in your left hand, and knot the thread at the bottom of the braid, just running the needle through a loop around the end of the braid. Do two such knots around the end of the braid. You can now let go of the braid.



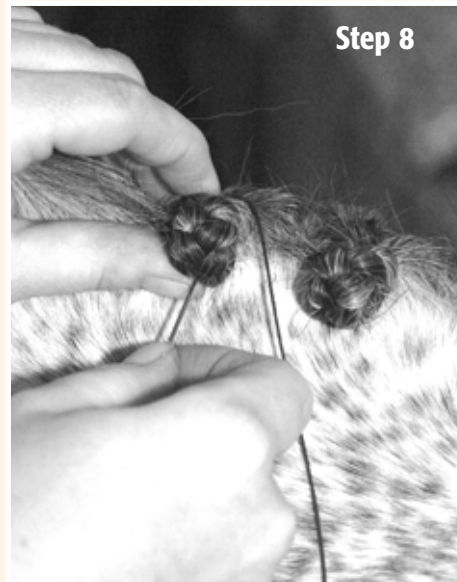
**Step 6**

Push the needle up through the top of the braid, right against the neck (without poking your horse!). Put your needle into the center of the section to ensure your braid will hang straight.



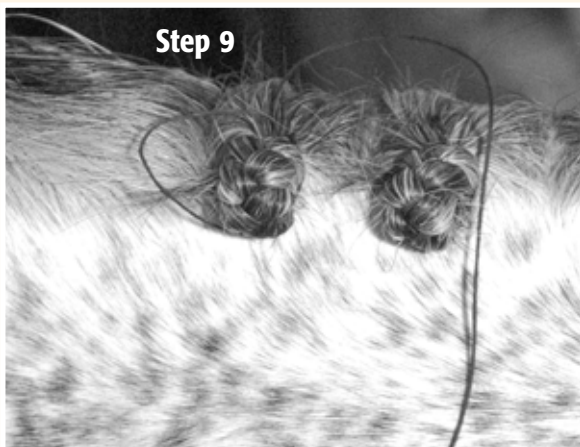
**Step 7**

Pull the thread until the end of the braid folds up to the neck. Pull so that the end knot nestles into the hair at the base of the neck, but not so that the end pulls through.



**Step 8**

With your left hand, pinch the folded braid in half again, so that it forms a small ball. Push your needle from the bottom of this ball through all the layers of the braid, close to the horse's neck, and out through the top. Have the loop of thread you've formed hanging to the right of the braid. Pull up tight on the thread, closing the loop around the right side of the braid. Make this pull firm, but not enough to break the thread or pull the braid off center.



**Step 9**

Push your needle up through the braid again, the same way, but this time with your loop falling to the left of the braid. Pull up firmly, again, and then loop your thread through one of the loops at the top, and knot.

If you want very secure braids, such as for overnight, you can repeat steps 8 and 9, so that there are two loops on either side of the braid. Then snip the thread close to the knot. Continue down the mane.



**Step 10**

The finished product—neat, uniform braids that show off an elegant neck.

## HUNTER BRAIDS

*Hunter braids lie flat against the neck, in a uniform line down the neck. Many braids create a long, elegant look to the neck.*



Just as you did for button braids, comb and wet the mane. But now, you'll have your lengths of yarn tucked through your belt, ready to use.

Start at the poll again, and divide a section of mane. For hunter braids, use smaller sections of mane than you did with button braids. An average-sized horse with a nice mane should have 30 to 40 braids. One rule of thumb is that your braids should be the size of a cigarette.

Start with sections about 1" wide—narrower if your horse's mane is thick, wider if it's a thin mane. Make sure there's the same amount of hair in each braid. So, the width of the sections will vary slightly, as the mane is thinner at the top and bottom.

Braid down the hair, and remember to keep the braid close to the neck and tight. Try to use the same number of twists to braid each braid—this is important in this type of braid because you want each braid the same length to create a uniform line.



Holding the end of the braid with your left hand, loop one strand of yarn around the braid and knot it. Repeat the knot with the other strand, so that there are two knots around the end of the braid. You can now let go of the braid. Braid all the way down the neck this way—this is called "braiding down."



With about 1" of hair left to braid, hold the braid in your left hand, and grab a piece of yarn. Lay the yarn over the center and right sections of braid, with the ends of the yarn hanging down in even lengths. Continue braiding, incorporating the yarn into the braid, to just before the end of the hair—about 1/4" from the end.



Once you've braided down the entire neck, you'll go back and pull up and tie up the braids. Starting at either end, push the loop end of your pull-through through the top of the braid, as close to the neck as possible. Make sure you go through the center of the section.

Loop the two ends of yarn through the loop of the pull-through, and pull them up through the top of the braid. Continue this all the way down the mane.





Step 5

Now, tie up the braids. With your left hand, pull up on the two pieces of yarn to pull the end knots of your braid up into the hair at the neck. There's a "sweet spot" here, where the knot is nestled into the hair just enough to make sure the braid hangs straight, but not enough so that the ends of hair poke out the top of the braid.

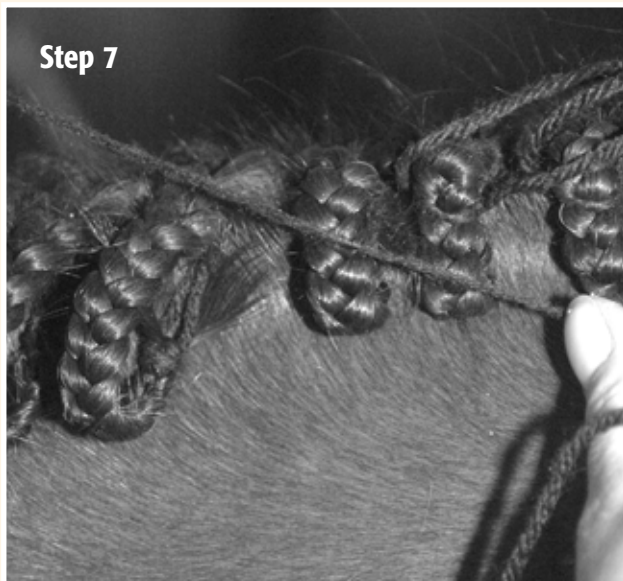
Hold the bottom of the braid with your right hand to keep from pulling the knot through the top. Practice will help enormously in learning how to get the knot invisibly into the hair at the base of the mane just far enough.



Step 6

Divide the two pieces of yarn, and tie a square knot loosely, so that it forms a loop in the air above the braid. Then, flip that loop down, against the neck, so that the two pieces of yarn go around each side of the braid. Then, tighten the knot so that it goes up under the braid. You'll have tied around the base of the braid, with the knot hiding under the braid. Pull firmly.

If you've seated your knot correctly in the mane when pulling the braid up, this step should create a nice little "bump" in your braid, when it folds over.



Step 7

Using a surgeon's knot (which is a square knot with the end looped twice through the loop rather than once), tie across the front of the braid. Pull firmly, but be careful not to break the yarn. With practice you'll learn the strength of your yarn—how much pull is enough to ensure a tight braid without breaking the yarn. Make sure that the end of your braid is even with the end of the braid next door.

You can create a bit more or less "bump" at the top of the braid in order to make the braid longer or shorter, but don't make it a drastic change. Remember, uniformity is the key. It doesn't matter if you have 30 beautiful braids—if they're all a different size and length, they're not going to look good.

After you've tied once on the top of the braid, do another surgeon's knot under the braid. Tie the knot loosely, then slip the loop under the braid and pull the knot tight. With this knot, you can also capture any stray ends of hair that might be sticking out from under the braid. Make sure the braid is sitting straight for this whole process. Continue tying up the braids all the way down the neck.



Step 8

Hold the ends of yarn out from the horse's neck, and work your way down the neck cutting the loose ends from each side of the braids.

## BRAIDING THE FORELOCK

*A beautifully braided forelock finishes off your lovely braid job and makes any head look elegant. For button braids, you can choose to just do another braid with your forelock, but a well-done French-braided forelock is a nice touch. French braiding is the process of bringing in small sections of hair from either side with each twist to form a braid down the center.*



Comb out and wet your horse's forelock. Then divide the hair into two sections, combed out to the side, giving you a nice center part. Your horse may look like the proverbial nerd momentarily, but this will make your braiding much easier.



Continue French braiding to the bottom of the forelock, and then braid normally to the bottom of the hair. Braid either yarn or thread into the ends of the braid, and then knot the end as you did for the hunter braid above, so that there are two long strands of yarn or thread hanging down.

Push your pull-through down through the top of the forelock braid, all the way down the middle of the forelock, and out the bottom under the tail end of the braid. Loop the ends of yarn through the pull-through, and then pull them up through the braid.



French-braid the forelock, grabbing small sections of each side of hair. It's much neater if you use a small section of the entire side-section of hair, so that there's no loose hair underneath the braid.



Pull on the ends of yarn until the tail end of the braid tucks up completely under the French braid (but don't let the end of the braid poke out at the top!). Push the pull-through sideways through the top of the braid and pull one of the end of yarn through. Repeat the other way, and then tie off the ends of yarn, and cut them close to the knot.



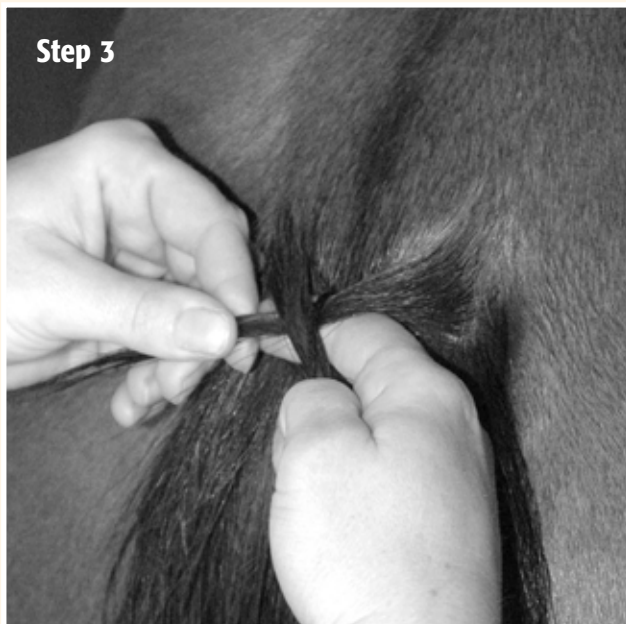
## BRAIDING A TAIL

*A braided tail is the ultimate finishing touch to hunter braids. Putting in a good tail braid takes patience, practice and strong hands. But if you're willing to learn and spend the time to perfect the skill, it's great way to complete your look. After you're done, wrap the tail braid with an elastic bandage immediately after you're finished braiding, to protect the tail hair. Unwrap it just before you get on to show. Tail braids should never be left in for any longer than necessary. The hair at the top of your horse's tail is precious, and you want to avoid pulling it out as much as you can.*



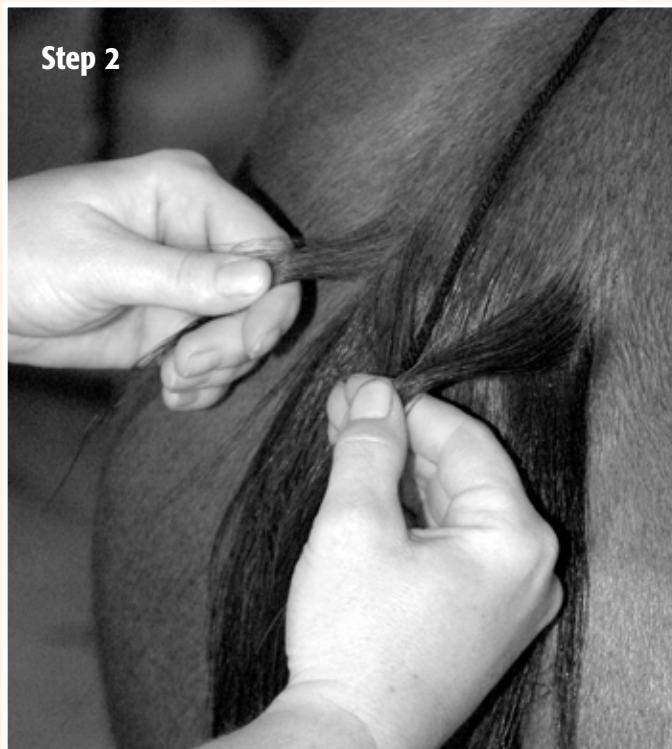
Step 1

Comb out your horse's tail thoroughly. If you want to spray it with a detangler, do so only to the bottom of the tail, below the tailbone. You don't want to make the hair you need to braid slippery! Make sure the tail is clean and relatively dandruff-free. Wet the hair at the top of the tail, and down the sides. If you want to spray the sides of the tail with a product like Quic-Braid, go ahead.



Step 3

Start braiding, and after one twist, bring the other end of the yarn down and incorporate it into another section of hair. Braid for two twists before you start bringing in more sections of hair from the sides.



Step 2

If you think your horse won't mind, and it will be safe, it's best to stand on your ladder to start braiding your tail. Being up over the top of the tail will help you hold and braid the hair more easily, and you can step down the ladder by the end of the braid.

Lay a strand of yarn (about 2' long) over the top of the horse's tail, so it lies down from their croup to hang down with the top hairs of the tail. Grab three small sections of hair—one from one side of the tail and two from the other. Include the end of the yarn with one of these sections.



Step 4

Work your way down the tail, bringing in small sections of hair from each side with each twist. As you're holding the braid with one hand, separate a small section of hair from the edge of the tail on the side, and pull it over to lie over the section of hair that's currently in the center of your braid. And then make your next twist in the braid, bringing the outside section of hair in over the center section, and repeat the process on the other side.



Step 5

Continue braiding down the tail. Make sure your sections are the same size all the way down. And make sure you're pulling tightly and evenly on both sides, so that the center braid remains straight down the tail. The braid down the center of the tail should stay close to the same size. If your horse has a very thick tail, and the braid is growing, drop a little bit of hair out of each section every now and then as you braid down—not the section you're pulling a new side section into, but the outside section you cross over.

Obviously, you'll have to have one hand holding the braid at all times. Holding the hair with more than just your thumb and index finger will help keep your hands from getting too tired. Just add to your grasp with your middle and ring fingers further down the hair.



Step 8

Tie a surgeon's knot (a square knot with the end put through the loop twice) so that the knot lies above the pinwheel, and then another with the knot below the pinwheel, and then another to the top. You can now cut the ends of the yarn.



Step 6

Braid all the way down to the end of the horse's tailbone. Once you've reached that point, continue braiding for about 4" to 6" without bringing in more hair. After you've braided to about 6", put a strand of yarn into the end of the braid and braid a few more twists, and then tie off the end of the braid like you did the mane braids. You should have a long tail of hair below the braid, which you'll divide into two sections, with a piece of the yarn in each section.



Step 9

Your tail ends of hair are still sticking out to the sides. With a new piece of yarn, form a loop around one of those sections of hair. Push your pull-through up under the last section of hair you pulled into your braid from the side. Loop the ends of the yarn through the pull-through, and pull it back down under that section of hair. The hair will follow, tucking the loose sections of hair down under that last piece from the side. It will lie flat with the rest of the loose tail hair below the braid.



Step 7

Spread those two sections out to either side, and roll the braid up gradually, with the sections of hair sticking out to the sides. Roll it tightly until the roll, or "pinwheel" is up against the tail braid, and hold it there firmly.

Without letting go of the pinwheel, push your pull-through from one side to the other, just at the bottom of the tail braid, between the last two sections of hair you pulled over, and just under the braid. Loop the end of yarn from that side through the pull-through, and pull it back to the other side. Repeat from the other side, so that the ends of yarn that were sticking out with the hair to each side are now crossed and pulled through under the tail braid. Pull them firmly, and now your pinwheel is secure.

