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Clean-and-polish routine gives new life to old shoes

ONE of the recurring comments we hear from women about their shoes is, 'I'm ready to throw them out, can you do anything?' says Penny Simmons, owner of Penny Loafers Shoe Shine Company, an eight-foot-high shoeshine "throne" located on Scotia Plaza's concourse level in downtown Toronto. That and, "How can I do it myself and not get dirty?"

Generally, her clients are delighted both by her performance and her leather renovations. Some even bring their children in. "Kids are just fascinated by it. To them I'm like a storyteller or a puppeteer," says Simmons, who gladly demonstrates tying shoes with the "double double knot" that keeps its tension all day, a good trick for all ages. As to the question of keeping clean, gloves help but Simmons avoids those. She's a hands-on person and prefers to go skin-to-skin with leather.

Basically, Simmons's approach can be broken down into two principles: Clean the surface of dirt and grime, then wax. It's no less than you'd do for your car. "We focus on cleaning the leather," she says. "We treat it like skin. Because of the cleaning, we get a better and longer-lasting shine. About 99 per cent of people will say, 'They look better than when I bought them.'"

Leather was skin, once. After tanning, animal hide emerges with a dense fibre network. The "pores" that trap dirt and grease are the open spaces between the fibres. A spray-on protector applied to new shoes helps confine dirt to the surface, which is particularly helpful for Nubuck or suede or any other soft, nappy-ish leather, says Gary Fullerton, regional sales supervisor for the shoe retailer Simard & Voyer. Contrary to common fears, leather treated to repel water and dirt can still transmit perspiration from the foot. (Ordinarily, leather can absorb and release more than 20 per cent of its weight in perspiration, which is why it pays to invest in a

Domestic Science

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cedar shoe-shaper. Unlike plastic, cedar not only holds the shape of areas that are constantly being flexed during wear, but also helps absorb this moisture.)

The following instructions are adapted from Simmons's own process, which involves some products not available to the consumer and a little more technique than most of us can muster, including using a lighter to singe off stray threads at seam edges. Since there are so many leather finishes, it's wise to ask a knowledgeable sales clerk about special care instructions. Spot cleaner can lift the beautiful transparent glaze on an expensive pair of fine-grained leather dress shoes, and canvas sneakers are easier to maintain using foaming cleaners and whiteners made specifically for them. (Read the fine print on products. Tana's Super White for smooth leathers, for instance, needs to be diluted with water before using it on canvas.)

1. Working quickly with a barber's or soft facial brush, apply saddle soap to one shoe at a time, then rub off the residue with a dry towel. Simmons likes to follow this up by "spooning" the leather with the edge of a soup spoon. "It's just a gentle way of dragging the excess moisture out of the pores." To clean the edges of the sole, use a toothbrush dipped in water, then wipe dry.

2. If necessary, treat light scuff marks or stains with leather stain-and-spot remover or white vinegar. Always test first on an inconspicuous spot.

3. Apply shoe cream polish. "We use it for its pigment. It's much richer than stain wax," says Simmons. On two-tone leather, do the light color first. Any color variations on soft, porous leather tend to even out as the shoe dries. On white leather sneakers or casual shoes, "don't be afraid to glop it on," she says. "Really work it

into the threads, too. The shoes will look just look beautiful."

4. Conditioner comes next, to replace oils that keep leather supple.

5. For shine, apply a stain wax, the old-fashioned type found in flat cans, then let stand. "It's easier to bring them to a shine if you set them aside and let the wax dry for about 10 minutes," Simmons says. Rub it into the edge of the shoe as well to camouflage wear.

6. Using light pressure, bring up the shine with a soft shoe brush. You should have one brush reserved for lights or neutrals. Finally, polish briskly with a professional shoe cloth.

There are specialized cleaning blocks, brushes and colour restorers for suede and Nubuck. For general upkeep, brush after wearing with the rubber side of a suede brush to clean out dirt and raise the nap. "The side with copper filaments is for really heavy stains and you use it in a picking rather than rubbing fashion," says Fullerton. An ordinary artgum-type eraser also cleans up the appearance of these materials, if you give yourself time.

Before storing winter footwear, excluding suede and Nubuck, dust with a dry towel, clean the edges with a wet toothbrush and then, if no salt is present, wipe with a damp towel. If you see or suspect salt, gently rub the affected area, then wipe entire surface, with a cloth dipped in salt-stain remover or white vinegar. Brush and set aside to dry for 30 to 60 minutes. If salt appears, repeat.

"The brushing opens the pores and allows additional salt to surface," explains Simmons. "I have done as many as six treatments on deeply salted leathers using only white vinegar." Once the footwear is dry, and there's no sign of salt, finish with polish or wax, insert shoe shapers or boot trees, and store in boxes. Weatherproofing can wait until next season.

Frances Litwin offers up tips for the home every other Thursday, alternating with Lucy Waverman's recipes.