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Saddle fitting: the basics and beyond: Avoid saddling yourself with problems

by Rebecca Colnar, Article donated by the mane points horse resource center.

When my parents first bought their Appaloosa gelding, they also purchased an inexpensive saddle. Under tack, the horse didn't seem to stride out as well as he should have and would display occasional behavior quirks.

The saddle, I discovered, was too narrow for the broad-backed gelding, and the gullet was putting pressure on the withers. When we found another saddle that fit him, his movement improved dramatically, and he seemed much happier.

Saddle fitting has gone high-tech. We've seen reports of a computerized saddle pad with pressure sensors that is put underneath the saddle and connected to a laptop. The horse is lounged, and a color image on the screen indicates places of high and low pressure while the horse goes through various gaits.

Saddle fit is critical, but such techniques may seem a bit extreme. Yet, saddle fitting is an aspect of riding not fully understood by many horse owners. Everyone hears about it, but most riders don't pay much attention. It's not so impossible to get right that you need a computer, but it helps to understand a few basics.

"The present design of saddles has been primarily for the comfort of the rider; riders want close contact with the horse," notes veterinarian Dr. Joyce C. Harman. "But in trying to achieve that, some manufacturers have removed most of the support the horse needs in the panels."

Fit, therefore, might be more important than ever.

Saddle fit doesn't mean just checking whether the horse gets saddle sores or not. Experts agree an ill-fitting saddle can cause problems for a horse's back without leaving sores-in muscles, ligaments and tissue-and can have subtle effects on how the animal moves.

"Skin and muscle damage and the pain associated with them usually show up as performance problems rather than overt sores," Harman told me. "There are many ways to tell if a saddle fits incorrectly. Objection to being saddled, for example. Also, resistance to work and training aids; front leg lameness; stumbling and tripping; not traveling straight; tail swishing and ear pinning; and hypersensitivity to being brushed all can be signs of a poor saddle fit."

Look at the saddle both off and on your horse. There are ways to check if your saddle fits properly as well as ways to improve its fit if it doesn't.

"Saddle fit should be considered as important as shoe fit in a person," the Middleburg, Va., vet suggests.

She lists the basic factors as the structure of the saddle; the position of the saddle on the back; the contact of the panels against the horse's back; whether the panels are wide enough for good support; whether the gullet is wide enough to clear the spine completely (2 1/2 to three inches); the placement of the girth and the levelness of the seat; the position of the stirrup bars; and how the rider fits in the seat.

In some cases, you can get by using pads and shims. In others, a different saddle is the only remedy.

Author Mary Midkiff in *Fitness, Performance and the Female Equestrian* notes that shims and pads can "act as a wedge to fill a gap and make up the difference in a poor fit. But if done incorrectly they can add to the problem." Midkiff advises talking to an expert who can help correct an ill-fitting saddle through shimming or redistribution.

If the saddle fits properly, she writes, breast straps and cruppers will not be needed.

Harman agrees. "The only time you should need a crupper or breast strap would be for specific conditions, such as steep, hilly trails or if you're jumping really big fences."

Harman notes that even new saddles, inexpensive as well as pricey ones, may have defects such as panels and flaps installed asymmetrically, or twisted trees. "Be sure to examine the saddle carefully from all angles to check for balance and symmetry. Minor differences from one side or another can be tolerated, but most differences that can be seen will cause pressure points on the horse's back or cause the rider difficulty in finding the correct position in the saddle."

Once you settle the pad and saddle onto the horse's back, you need to make sure they're placed correctly. The pommel will be too high on an English saddle if it is placed too far forward.

When western saddles are too far forward, they exert pressure on the top of the scapula. This problem is often solved by moving the saddle back slightly.

"With some western saddles, the seat will become better balanced when the saddle is moved off the shoulders; with others, it will tip the rider forward. It's also common for the pommel to be too close to the withers," Harman says.

Midkiff suggests putting a flat hand under the pommel and moving it along the shoulder area. The saddle should have enough clearance to move naturally. You also don't want your saddle to contact the point of the hip or the loins—only the ribcage. There should be at least four inches between the back of the saddle and the point of the hip, depending on the horse.

A saddle too far forward creates a type of bridge, which puts pressure on the shoulders and the back of the saddle.

"This causes the rider's weight to be distributed in four points, one on each side of the withers/shoulder blade and one each side of the back at the rear of the saddle, rather than evenly along the horse's back. This bridging causes a horse to stiffen his back," Harman says.

The gullet needs to be wide enough to allow the spine complete freedom from pressure, and the angle of the panels should follow the angle of the horse's back under the cantle.

"The saddle must sit squarely down the middle of the back supported by the panels. The spine is not made to carry weight directly on it," Harman says. The tree of the saddle should also fit without pads. Harman notes that western saddles often have a large, slightly raised area at the base of the tree where contact with the withers occurs, and English close-contact saddles often have an outward flare to the tree along the withers, which causes a small, painful pressure point.

The saddle should always clear the withers. (At least an inch on a high-withered horse.)

You need to check the saddle for stability. "The saddle should not teeter or rock from front to back or side to side," Midkiff suggests.

A level seat, girth and rider all have an impact on the saddle fit.

Harman stresses that the seat must be level when viewed from the side, noting that if it is not, the rider will be out of balance and unable to help the horse, or ride correctly.

Riders also need to know what size seat they need in a saddle.

"The most common fault is having the seat too small for the rider, forcing him or her to sit at the back of the saddle. This puts excessive pressure on the horse's back," Harman says. "In an English saddle, the rider's knee should be at the center of the knee roll."

If your horse has white hairs under the saddle, that means there is a pressure point above them. "You can look for that on a western saddle-the sheepskin covering the panels will become worn down over the pressure points. You can also check by riding with a clean, thin white saddle pad. Where there are dark spots after 20 minutes, there will generally be pressure points," Harman says.

Saddle fitting continues to be a tricky business because of the several ever-changing variables, namely the saddle, the horse and the rider. Keep in mind that horses change depending on their physical condition and amount of training.

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