

Saddle Fit for the Horse and Rider

Comfort for the Horse

A proper fitting saddle for a horse may be likened to a comfortable boot for the rider. If the saddle does not fit, the horse may exhibit displeasure while being ridden, or performance may be compromised. Some horses will not bend or collect to their fullest potential. In severe cases actual physical injury may occur, with the horse developing “saddle sores”.

In order to discuss saddle fit one must first address proper placement of the saddle. A saddle should ride centered from right to left and positioned such that the bars of the tree are just behind the horse’s scapula. Such placement will prevent interference with the animal’s shoulders. The saddle should not rock up excessively in the hind end, but should pull down evenly on the horse’s back. The angle and the rocker of the saddle trees bars should follow the lines of the horse’s back. If the saddle does not make contact with the back in the middle of the bars it is referred to as “bridging”. Such a saddle will cause excessive pressure on the withers and in the loin area. One must be aware that some horses may carry more muscle or fat on one wither side or the other. Bar contact changes with the addition of the rider’s weight.

It is not uncommon to observe horsemen with the saddle positioned too far forward. Perhaps the saddle has tried to slip back into it’s proper position and the rider has resorted to a breast collar to hold it where he believes it should be. Some horses are quite forgiving of this transgression while others are more likely to show their displeasure.



A saddle sitting nicely on a horse’s back.



View of a saddle tree placed correctly behind the scapula.

Testing the Manufactured Saddle

In order to determine fit in a manufactured saddle where there is no record of the tree, ideally the saddle should be placed on the horse with the use of an adequate saddle pad. With the girth tightened and a rider mounted, the gullet must have adequate clearance above the horse's withers. The horse should then be ridden to the extent that he or she sweats under the saddle pad. The saddle may then be removed and the back examined for evenness of sweating. The back should also be palpated for signs of discomfort.

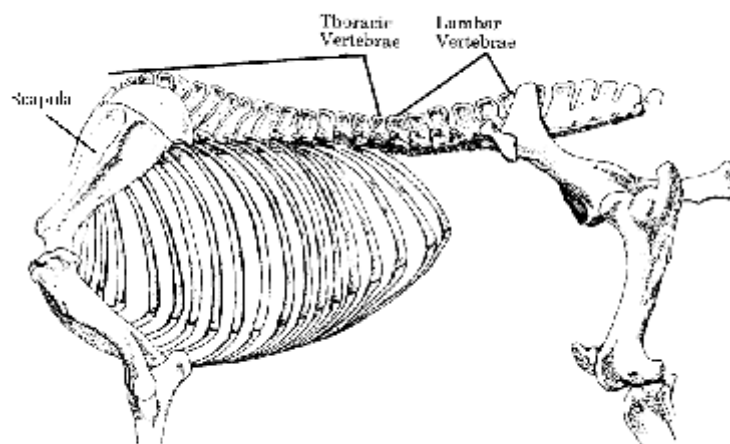


A nicely sweated back.

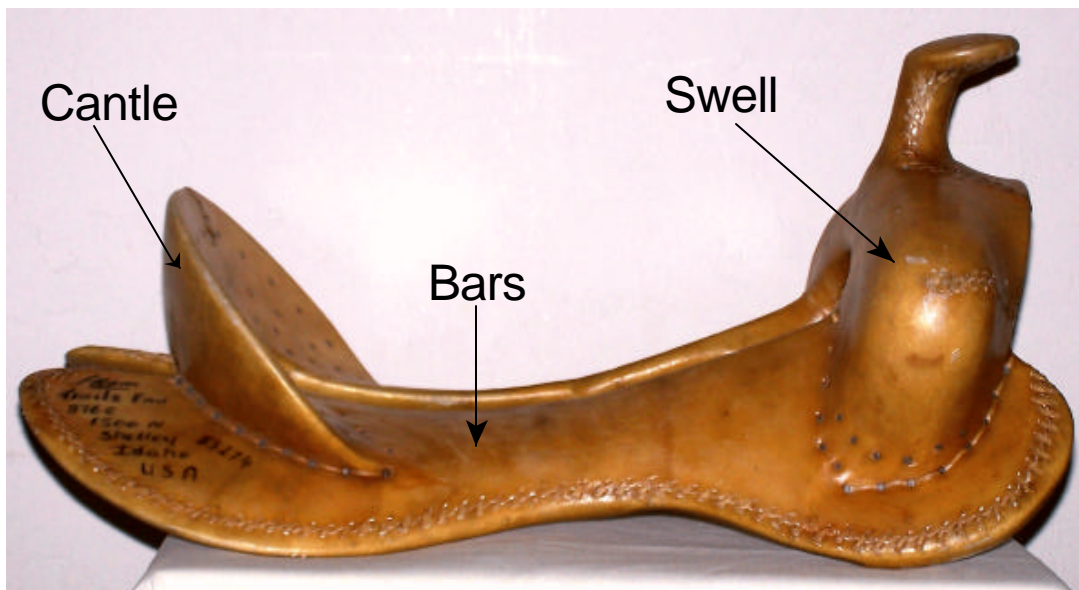
The Effects of a Poorly Fitting Saddle

The most common concern for many riders is the discovery of dry spots on each side of the withers. Dry spots are typically caused by excessive pressure concentrated in one area. The skin and hair follicles are compressed and the area does not sweat. Such spots are more common in young horses with immature backs. Many horses do not show pain when the spots are handled and the problem may be remedied with an adequate saddle pad. Dry spots with raised skin are cause for more serious concern, and may lead to saddle sores or white hair regrowth if the problem is not corrected. Soreness in the horse's loin may not be visibly seen, and requires palpation by the rider to identify. Pain in this area is generally caused by a bridging saddle, straight bar tips or skirt interference.

Straight bars or improperly blocked skirts may also cause a horse discomfort if the horse has very prominent shoulders. Rubbing or pressure sores may occur at the leading edge of the skirts or just behind where the saddle tree's bars begin. Similarly a long, square skirted saddle on a short backed horse may cause interference at the points of the horse's hips. If a saddle does not have an adequate channel above the horse's spine it will cause pressure sores from the vertebrae rubbing the saddle pad.



When evaluating equine structure and saddle fitting, consideration must be given to changes that occur over an animal's life. As a horse matures, the vertebrae often become more pronounced and drop, making what some refer to as a "wither pocket". Many young horses carry a lot of fat on each side of the withers and this tissue disappears as a horse ages. Additionally, conditioning and amount of body fat affect a saddle's fit. In other words, the saddle that fits your horse in the winter may not fit as well after he has been turned out on summer pasture.



The Custom Saddle

The question is sometimes asked: Why should I spend \$2,000+ on a custom saddle when a \$1000 factory saddle will work fine and the answer is perhaps you don't need to. The question might better be stated: What should I get for my extra dollars spent? First off, a custom saddle from a mediocre saddle maker may certainly be no better than a higher quality factory saddle. A quality custom saddle should offer you much better fit for both horse and rider and a longer useful life for the saddle. Custom makers often use materials costing several times that of factory saddles and

generally hand cut, shape and tool parts for a better fit. Additionally, having a saddle seat shaped to match your seat makes for a more pleasant day in the saddle. Riders should be cautious about having a saddle made to fit one particular odd backed horse as the saddle may not work on other animals, that horse's back will change as he ages and when the horse eventually dies, you are left with an odd saddle.

Saddle Pads

Saddle pads offer protection for the horse and the saddle. They should also help the saddle form-fit to the horse, provide shock absorption and help dissipate heat and sweat. In this saddlemaker's opinion, no material accomplishes this as efficiently as wool. Real wool felt and woven wool develop a memory when used on the same horse with the same saddle. This "memory" allows the pad to conform to the horse and compress where needed thereby filling voids and allowing more even pressure distribution. Wool also is second to none in wicking away moisture from a sweaty horse's back. Caution should be exercised when using synthetic foam and gel pads as some of these trap heat against a horse. This is perhaps not a factor for a horse ridden only an hour but may be a problem for the horse in harder work. Additionally, some gel pads actually concentrate pressure rather than spreading it. It should also be stated that more is not always better. Most western horses get along fine with 5/8" to 1" total padding. Rope horses and jumping horses may require more for additional shock absorption.