

By Elizabeth Graves

In A Fit Over Saddle Fit

The second in a three part series

Now that we have a better understanding of a saddle's purpose, structure and how it should or should not function, it's time to learn how to be sure your current saddle is the right one, or what to look for when a new saddle is needed.

Whatever Can Go Wrong

BEFORE ONE STARTS TO EXAMINE FOR SADDLE FIT A FEW OTHER ISSUES MUST be addressed first. Is your horse sound in body? Meaning, is everything else in order? This includes things you may never have equated with saddle fit.

For example, teeth are very important to the soundness of a horse's spinal process. Horses' teeth must have regular floating and maintenance to help keep the jaws aligned. When the jaws of a horse are not in alignment it can have a direct bearing on the horse's entire spine.

A horse's body may need some care, such as chiropractic adjustment, or possibly just some good muscle work to help get the spine straight, free up a misaligned or locked lumbar sacral joint, misaligned hips, or create a healthy, properly developed top line, etc. Hooves should be trimmed correctly, in balance and trimmed to a horse's natural angles, with no broken angles and of proper heel to toe ratio for each individual. Improper trimming and shoeing can certainly affect a horse's overall body health and development, in some cases causing a horse to go crooked or imbalanced - again effecting saddle fit and proper function. These things are very important to have in order before getting a clear idea of whether or not a saddle is fitting.

Riding in an improper manner can negate a good fitting saddle. Having your own body in healthy alignment can have a direct bearing of how a saddle works. Just a man's wallet (loaded with items) in a back pocket can cause a rider to sit crookedly - affecting saddle fit.

Other factors that can create a misaligned spine in the horse are a saddle that fits poorly, or one that fits well, but is improperly placed and/or used.



Marking a rider with large white dots aids in visualizing the rider's position. Correct position allows the saddle to work correctly.

Helpful Tools

THERE ARE MANY HELPFUL AIDS TO HELP ONE DETERMINE FIT. FIRST and foremost is being able to see and second is feel.

Always be sure you have a saddle properly placed. It has long been all too common in the gaited horse community, and now following through to all breeds, to place the saddle too far back on the horse. This is primarily due to much of the micro fitting we are forced to do caused by improperly made saddletrees. If a saddletree is properly made with all the correct elements, we should not need to micro-fit a saddle to each horse, as a correctly constructed tree can actually fit several similar body types without creating discomfort or interference to a horse's body and movement. For instance, a western type treed saddle should be placed with the front arch in

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line with the crest of the withers. If the saddle has the proper flare in the front it will and should clear the shoulders. This is also true of many forward seat type English saddles as the larger panels should be constructed and padded to be over the shoulder, but not make contact. Dressage type saddles will be placed a bit farther back, but should still not dig in behind the shoulders affecting forward and backward motion of the front legs. It is not uncommon once a rider is mounted to have a saddle slide about an inch farther back, but more than this may indicate improper fit or use.

It is best in checking for fit to place the saddle without a blanket or saddle pad; a towel can be used to protect the underside of a saddle if necessary. *For a good fitting saddle...*

- ◆ Look for the flare in the front; you should be able to slide your fingers up to the second knuckles freely between the saddle and shoulders.
- ◆ The saddle gullet from front to back should have no contact with the spine.
- ◆ There should be plenty of room from the top of the gullet in the saddle front to the top of the wither. A common rule of thumb is to leave a two-finger width gap.
- ◆ Feel for bridging (gaps of no contact) along each side of the spine along the tree bars of a Western saddle or the padding of an English saddle.
- ◆ Check for undesired downward pressure in the back of the saddle, which could put pressure on, or drive into, the spine or lumbar span area.
- ◆ A saddle should have minimal rock when one places a hand on the front arch and on the cantle, putting some downward pressure, while alternating pressure forward and back of each hand.
- ◆ All these factors should be checked again while mounted as the weight of a rider can change the characteristics of a saddle.



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Use of a "saddle bra" keeps the back of saddle stable, level and helps distribute a rider's weight effectively.

There are tools on the market that can be of some value in helping to determine saddle fit. They must be used correctly and are only as good as the person applying the aid or science in determining fit. Examples include heat sensors, pressure sensors and impression pads. These can also be good tools to use when a saddle is fitting to check for rider imbalances in equitation. Poor equitation can affect the reading of these tools when applied to saddle fit.

When looking for a new or used saddle or having a custom saddle fit, a correctly done back tracing can work well. I have found the Equimeasure kit to be a very valuable tool in fitting when a horse cannot be present for a fitting, as the heated, moldable material is shaped to the horse's back and is reusable. When you have used a tracing or molding product, you must hope that the saddle fitter is competent to read them correctly. Fitting a bare tree to a horse's back to check for tree fit is best, but the rest of the saddle must be made properly also for it to function as it should.

Dry Spots and White Hair

MANY OF US HAVE BECOME TOO dependent on evidence of dry spots to indicate pressure points of our saddles. Dry spots under a saddle can be helpful, but are not always a reliable science when checking for

saddle fit. A saddle can fit just fine, but again improper saddle position, rider position, not using back rigging, or using it incorrectly, can bring about dry spots. Some saddle pads also can hold in heat and/or create more sweating or even wick away moisture leading to a false reading of dry spots.

When white hair starts to become evident this indicates the saddle has created enough pressure in that specific area for enough time to kill hair follicles, indicating readjustment or replacement of a saddle is absolutely necessary. It is important to check saddle fit often to be sure correct fit is occurring continuously, hopefully before white hair becomes present.

Other Warning Signs

SOMETIMES OUR HORSES CAN TAKE AN awful lot of discomfort or pain before we see any signs. However, they can be showing us

some physical signs before we truly are aware of a problem. Sometimes that one step away from us when lifting a saddle towards the horse's back is that all-important sign that something is up with saddled fit. A

horse that takes a step away during mounting is another. Before long the signs are bigger and often scary to us and get overlooked as poor behavior when it's the only way a horse has to communicate to us that something is happening.

Sometimes our mounting habits can also cause a good fitting saddle to be uncomfortable to the horse, so use a mounting block or aid when possible. When mounting from the ground use your own strength and impulsion to lift yourself up, rather than drag and pull

your body up. A good rule of thumb for proper mounting is to place one hand with the rein on the neck in front of the saddle and the other to the farthest side of the swell, and mount facing forward with the foot in the stirrup as close to the horse's body as possible (without poking the horse).

Parking a horse out to mount is also very hard on a horse's body and is not advised.

Some horses can give us unhappy signs due to over-tightening of the front girth or in responding to previously bad riding experiences, so work through the process of elimination to be sure what a horse's behavior is reacting to.



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Equimeasure, unshaped.



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Equimeasure, after heating and molding. It can be reheated and reshaped.



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A "pack cinch" as an alternative to back rigging keeps the saddle level and still. This makes for a saddle to work correctly, and is very comfortable to the horse.

Blankets, Pads and Girths

THERE ARE AS MANY SADDLE PADS AND BLANKETS OUT THERE to choose from as there are varying types of saddles and makers. They can be very costly.

Don't try to make a saddle fit by adding more padding. Extra padding under any pressure points can make the situation much worse. An overly thick pad or blanket (or layers of them) can negate a good fitting saddle, taking it too far up off the horse's back and increasing instability, which most of us compensate for by over tightening the girth. Three problems in one!

When it comes to pads and blankets, less is so much more when a saddle fits well. I have found that anything over one-half-inch thick is more than needed. A pad, blanket and girth should also have the ability to breath and wick away moisture from the horse's coat. Some new-age products can actually hold in heat, creating hot spots on a horse's back or girth area. Wool and mohair are always good choices and there are some nice wool acrylic blends that perform well.

Materials used to keep a saddle from slipping create a situation in which saddle fit, proper use, equitation and /or mounting need to be addressed. Products that grip a horse's back pull on the hair and skin, possibly causing soft tissue tears (of skin from body). There should be some allowance for a pad / blanket and girth to have a slight bit of slippage so as not to pull on a horse's hair and skin. A little slippage is normal.

Girth galls are another of those things that can create a horse to suddenly behave differently than normal. Keeping pads, blankets and girths clean is one of the most important factors in keeping them functioning properly and to avoid galling problems. Stiff, dirty fibers are much more likely to gall, than supple, clean fibers.

Consumer Beware

MORE MONEY SPENT ON PADS, BLANKETS AND GIRTHS DOESN'T guarantee you'll get a better product. Be open minded and look at what will perform best for your horse, not the Big Fancy Sell that comes with every "new and improved" product. Here again, watching and feeling your horse often to check performance of a product is of utmost importance, not following the newest, most popular trend or the biggest marketing program. **Marketing terminology can sometimes be geared more to what sounds great to the human, but may not always be in the best interest of our horses.** You as the consumer must use the products correctly and responsibly and there are many out there for us to choose from that are of excellent quality and performance, settle for nothing less.

Author's note: In part 3 we will address how to use a new saddle correctly, how to make a current ill-fitting saddle function properly if possible. Until then take every opportunity to look at every saddle you come across and compare. Start to develop that eye and feel for a better, accurate ability to see saddle fit and use properly.

