

In A Fit Over Saddle Fit

Part 3 of 3

So far in the previous two articles we have covered a lot of material on how saddles are structured, how they can work properly or improperly, and varying factors that can influence their performance. In this last article we look at ways to make a current saddle that is not fitting or functioning properly become workable.



A saddle with "In-Skirt" rigging, reinforced with rivets on the front cinch, and decorative metal on the backcinch. Full rigging.

Design Flaws

NOT ALL SADDLES CAN BE MADE TO work for a specific horse, but in many cases it can be done. There are some saddles though, that are made so poorly they will not work properly on any horse. So before actually applying a saddle to a horse's back, it needs to be evaluated as to whether or not it is built to function properly in the first place.

Good examples of common flaws in saddles are the 7/8 and full positions of the front rigging of Western saddles. There really is no need for either of these two positions to exist as they both cause a saddle to work in a downhill orientation. The only way this type of rigging could function would be if the tree was designed to sit farther back on the horse, but when this type of placement is applied we risk sores or injuring the horse's back, as well as moving the rider from the proper position (for the horse's ease and freedom of movement). Rigging set so far forward also places the

girth too far forward, which causes it to restrict leg movement (forward and back) and creates skin rolls and pinches behind the front legs.

Likewise, it is important to check the billet placement on English saddles. Placement too far forward is rather common; in such cases using the two-farthest back billets can greatly improve the saddle's performance.

of the horse's spine for comfort of the horse. A tremendous improvement.

Another consideration is whether or not the saddle is made so to be safe. It is all too common to see very poor workmanship. Check to be sure that where stitching for attachments has been used there is enough of it and it is of good quality. Many saddles have rivets holding

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Some English saddle makers are breaking manufacturing tradition and creating what is termed a "Y rigging". This includes a strap that is attached to the back of the saddle and stitched to the farthest back billet, which makes the saddle's function more about keeping a level platform for the rider while distributing rider weight evenly along each side

rigging, stirrup leathers and fenders together. Check to be sure there are enough rivets to hold securely. Also when screws are used, check that there are enough of them and that no screws or nails come through on the bottom side of the saddle where they can make contact with the horse's body.

Saddles that have slots for back

rigging billets need to be examined for durability. It is common to see a single layer of leather with a simple slot cut in for the back rigging, which is not re-enforced with a second layer of leather or metal. With proper use of the back rigging these slots will eventually rip out. Look for, or add, a reinforcing layer.

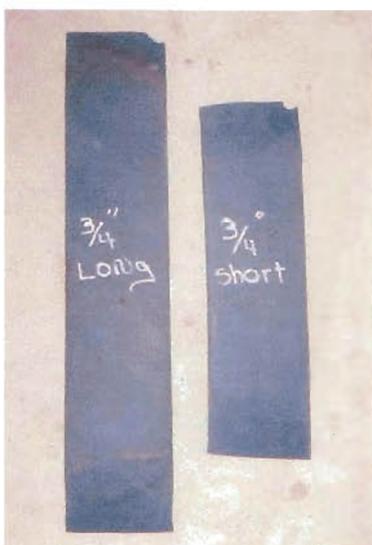
Any type of rigging, front or back, that is not attached to the saddletree, but is attached to or cut into the skirting, is called "In-Skirt Rigging". In-Skirt Rigging has limitations of proper performance, but has become popular with some manufacturers due to ease and lower cost to manufacture.

An educated leather worker can easily repair many of these problems at a reasonable expense.

Telltale Short Cuts

ANOTHER CONSIDERATION IN QUALITY that is not necessarily related to function includes dyed leather versus a colored lacquer on leather. Dyed leather penetrates the leather surface, is permanent and does not wear or scratch off as does a colored lacquer or level coat that just sits on the top of leather. Colored lacquers can be an indication of imported and/or poor quality leather used by a manufacture cutting down costs.

Another important part of good saddle manufacturing is proper oiling of a saddle during construction.



Caption



Caption

Most parts of a saddle go through some wetting with water in order to make the leather flexible enough to shape during the manufacturing process, so the leather should be oiled to preserve its integrity. Some new saddles are not receiving the proper amount of oiling (or any at all!) in the manufacturing process. A full-sized, all-leather stock type saddle will take up to 1 1/2 quarts of oil in the manufacturing process. This adds a considerable amount of weight to the saddle, so reducing the amount of oil also reduces saddle weight and lighter saddles are what a large percentage of the consumer market is asking for. Also, when asking about the weight of a saddle, ask if this weight includes the girths and stirrups in total weight.

Purchasing a new or used saddle of quality and proper design, while costing a bit more, can save you and your horse risk of injury and insure longevity of performance. It may also save a considerable amount in physical rehab and/or training expense for a horse that has suffered improper saddle issues. So often, when buying that first horse, the owner thinks that any saddle will do, as "it's just a saddle and more for the rider than the horse". This kind of thinking can have huge negative ramifications to both horse and rider.

Changes in Horse Fit

AN EXPERIENCED EYE CAN TELL WHAT the spring of the ribs, angles and overall body shape of a young horse is going to be. A horse at age three is very likely going to need a different



Caption

sized saddle now than it will at age five or six when it is close to finished in its physical maturity. For an immature horse, one can get by if a saddle is a bit bigger with a thicker pad if the saddle sits level, has no pressure points and no bridging of the saddle is evident. This is the only time I would advise a thicker type padding to help a saddle work.

Sometimes a saddle that previously fit a horse well becomes unworkable due to physical changes in the horse related to injuries or changes in his body carriage due to influences by the rider. The opposite can also be found in which a saddle that did not fit previously may be able to with physical corrections to a horse's body.

In A Fit Over Saddle Fit

Sizes of shim pairs:

Short shims:

1. Length 15 inches, 4 1/2 inches wide, 1/2 inch thick
2. Length 15 inches, 4 1/2 inches wide, 3/4 inch thick

Long shims:

3. Length 21 inches, 4 1/2 inches wide, 1/2 inch thick
4. Length 21 inches, 4 1/2 inches wide, 3/4 inch thick

Down hill shims:

5. Length 21 inches, 4 1/2 inches wide, 1/2 inch thick
6. Length 21 inches, 4 1/2 inches wide, 3/4 inch thick

Shims

IT IS SO COMMON IN MY TRAVELS TO FIND folks that have saddles that work great, but are being used incorrectly. **If you have a good saddle that just doesn't fit, shimming might make it workable.** Although still not as ideal as a properly fitting saddle, shimming can buy time until a better fitting saddle can be acquired.

Shimming can help correct:

- ◆ Points of pressure in the front of a saddle
- ◆ Open up the front of a saddle to free shoulder area
- ◆ Points of pressure at the rear of a saddle
- ◆ Bridging of the saddle along each side of the spine
- ◆ Level a downhill orientated saddle
- ◆ Level a saddle on a downhill built horse
- ◆ Create a channel over the spine in a treeless saddle or bareback pad
- ◆ Create a wider gullet in a saddle with too narrow of gullet
- ◆ Create a higher gullet in a saddle with a shallow gullet

Shims can be easily made of closed cell foam found in the larger fabric warehouses.

I have found it good to have on hand a variety of different sized shim pairs for various fitting situations due to the large number of horses I work with.

All you need is the correct pair of shims for your particular situation.

Shims must be made to conform to the horse's shape. Short and long shims must be beveled at the top and bottom on each end, which is easily

have downward pressure applied from the back of the saddle to equalize pressure along the bars. To use shims in a single-rigged saddle of any other kind will actually make an ill-fitting situation worse.

Our horses are the best source for answers as to whether or not a saddle is working.

done with a belt sander. Downhill shims are beveled as for short and long shims in the front, but beveled a

longer distance from the center of the shim length to the end of the shim.

I have found shims thicker than 3/4 of an inch lift the saddle too far off the horse's back and make it very unstable. They are not advised except in unique situations.



Caption

Using Shims

USING SHIMS UNDER AN ENGLISH saddle is not advised unless it has "Y-rigging" or is being used with a saddle bra. Instead, the panels on English saddles can be re-stuffed easily. For fit problems such as bridging, stuffing can be applied between the padded panels and seat of the saddle.

When using shims with non-English type saddles they are to be used only with saddles that are center fire rigged, double rigged, or with use of a pack cinch or saddle bra for them to work correctly. Shims should not be used with a saddle that cannot

Shims can easily be duct taped in position along the saddletree bars to maintain correct placement. For those using different sized shims for multiple horses there are specially made saddle pads with pockets to slide shims in and out quick and easy changes.

When using shims to relieve pressure points front or back, or to open up the front of a saddle to clear a horse's shoulders, shims should always be placed behind the points of pressure, along the tree bars of the saddle if it is in the front of the saddle, and behind the point of pressure if it is in the back of the saddle. Never use shims under the pressure points; placing them under pressure points will increase pressure not relieve it.

Bridging, when the tree bars are not making the even contact along each side of the horse's spine needed to distribute rider weight evenly can be corrected with short shims of desired thickness placed in center of the tree bar to fill in contact gaps.

Downhill shims of needed thickness will help correct a saddle that runs downhill, or help a saddle sit level on a



Caption



Caption

horse that is built downhill, by placing the thickest end to the front of the horse. When using shims remember to run them along the saddletree bars and leave at least a three-inch gullet width to clear the horse's spine.

It is not advised to shim a horse on one side only. If it seems that this is needed (i.e. the horse is uneven), then it

is time to check for other areas of trouble such as varying hoof lengths and/or angles, injury, improper muscle development, etc. Address the cause of unevenness properly for correction, as shimming one side of a saddle can only aggravate and possibly escalate these types of situations.

Closing Thoughts

THERE ARE A VAST AMOUNT OF VARYING OPINIONS ON THE subject of the saddle's purpose, function and proper use. These variations of opinion have been around as long as saddles have existed; they are nothing new.

Our horses are the best source for answers as to whether or not a saddle is working through their behavior and performance. Be open minded while looking at many different horses and saddles to get that all-important experience and to develop a good eye for a correctly made saddle that fits. Learning the history and evolution of saddles worldwide will also help. New material is not the only, or always even the best, source of information on any subject.

Much of what I have learned through the years is from some great old saddle makers and horseman retired or now gone, from my own experience with thousands of horses, and from others traveling the same journey in seeking knowledge to better help the horse to be comfortable and perform at its best. I feel it is important we share with each other what we learn along the way on the subject and never be afraid to back up and change an opinion and try something different if it makes sense. In many ways saddle manufacturing has remained the same and gone backwards in others. It is an evolving science sure to bring us even better products in the future. Enjoy the experience of learning what saddle fit can teach you.

