



How old-fashioned static saddle fit differs from dynamic saddle fit for the moving horse.

DON'T GET STUCK

By Jochen Schleese, Certified Master Saddler

Three different metal parts used in riding come in close contact with the horse. One is the bit, one is the horse's shoes, and the last is the gullet plate of the saddle. Each of these needs to be fitted properly to your horse—two of them by trained experts who have an understanding of equine anatomy. But just like fitting a shoe, there are different opinions as to how gullet plates need to be fitted.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPER GULLET PLATE FIT

The most verified long term damage to a horse's back has been proven to result from incorrectly fitted gullet plates (the plate that fits across the head or pommel of the saddle). Fiber optic cameras, MRIs, thermography, laser sensors, 3D animation and computerized saddle pads have made it very clear that the A-frame withers of the static horse becomes a U-frame in motion. In *Diagram A*, this is illustrated by the broken green line representing the wither shape in motion. Therefore, symptomatic white hairs always show up at the top of the side of the withers, where the gullet plate generally pinches if it doesn't fit. We have already discussed the necessity of matching both the angle and width of the gullet plate and tree points to the horse's conformation at the withers and shoulder muscles.

FITTING THE HORSE IN MOTION

The gullet plate shape and size has to be set to accommodate the moving horse. Many saddle fitters can fit an English saddle to a horse that is standing still in the crossties. There are traditional points of reference for static fit—wither clearance, panels touching evenly all the way down, etc. Where it becomes interesting, and where it becomes difficult beyond

the ability of many saddle fitters, not to mention the capability of the saddle construction itself, is fitting the saddle so that it works when the horse begins to move.

The saddle sits on many different muscle groups on the horse's back. To begin explaining the importance of gullet plate fit, we start at the front of the saddle under the pommel, where the metal gullet plate is. The gullet plate needs to align with the angle and width of the shoulder. The shoulder moves upwards and backwards 4" to 8" under the tree points during motion. The tree angle is often incorrectly fitted to the muscle angle without considering the shoulder angle, which can result in cartilage and nerve damage due to restriction of movement. The gullet plate sits over two opposing muscle groups; the top will contract (pulling the shoulder upwards and getting bigger) while the bottom expands or elongates during motion. This is how the "V" becomes a "U" over the withers.

WITHER CLEARANCE

We need two to three fingers' clearance at the withers—but all around the withers, not just on top. Under the front of your saddle we find a muscle that extends all the way up into the neck, the trapezius. A tight V-shaped gullet plate results in pinched muscles and a tight neck and back (see *Diagram B*). A gullet plate that too closely follows the shape of the static wither can also cause this problem (*Diagram C*).

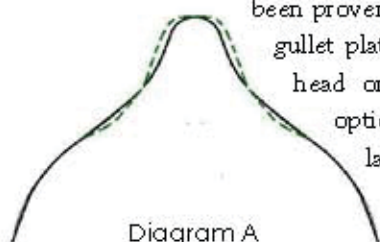


Diagram A

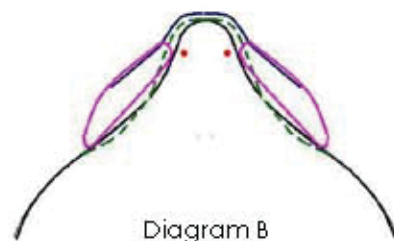


Diagram B

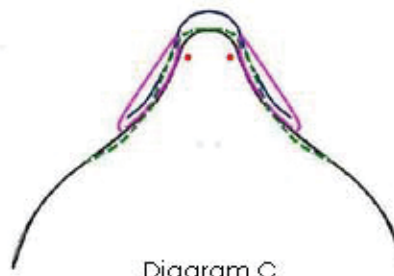


Diagram C