



An ergonomist determines the horse's shoulder angle using the withers gauge from Sprenger.

# HOW *technology* IS CHANGING THE WAY SADDLES ARE FITTED

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CSE



In so many areas of our modern world, technologies are being developed to improve the accuracy and speed of equipment and tasks. So it isn't a surprise to see technological innovations popping up in the equestrian world as well, including the precise field of saddle fit.

## IT'S ALL IN THE INTERPRETATION

Many tools have been developed to assist in the diagnosis of saddle fit. But as “sexy” as they are, they are still just tools, providing information that exemplifies the situation at a given moment. Unless you have someone who actually knows what to do with this information, and provide you with a solution to your issue, it's pretty much without value. Many people can tell you what's visually wrong with your saddle, but there are very few who can analyse the data and actually tell you why you are having the issue you are.

In addition, several of these tools can be subjectively manipulated, so in the wrong hands they simply become marketing tools to show you exactly what the technician wants you to see. Thermography is one tool that can provide you with a very pretty picture filled with lots of colors, but the interpretation is open to error unless you have someone well trained in the use of the instrument. Computerized saddle pads that measure pressure points (by integrating sensors in every square inch of the pad, which are linked to a computer readout) are also not without fault, as pressure will change according to the gait and rider balance.

## UP-AND-COMING TECHNOLOGY

Let's take a look at some of the other tools that are being used to assist with saddle fit:

- One of the newest on the market is the **HORSESHAPE®** laser, a truly interesting piece of machinery. It reads the three-dimensional shape of the horse's back within seconds, and transmits this information back to the main computer for analysis. It is best used when a full custom saddle is being made to accommodate a particular horse's back; it also gives you the option of acquiring a "cut-out" form of your horse's back shape, clearly allowing for comparisons of changing conformation over time.

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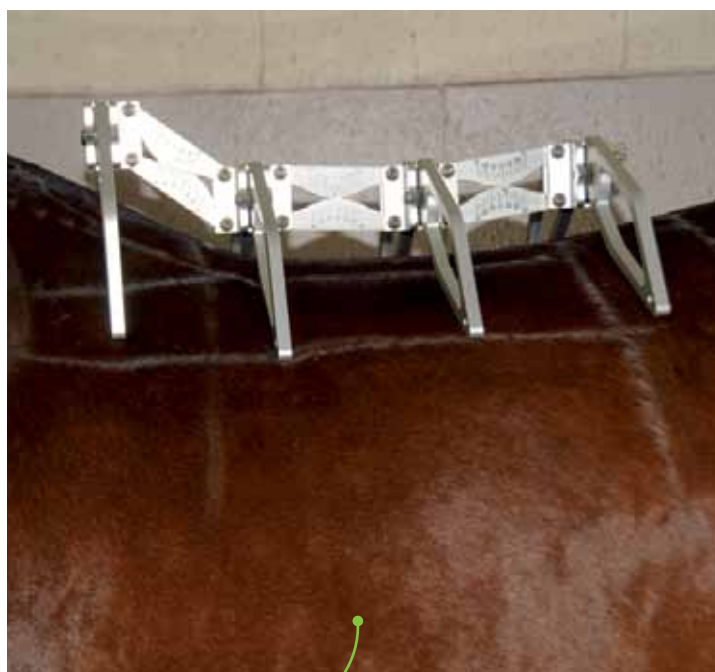


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- The **ARC DEVICE™** is a manual measuring device; it's fitted to each individual horse's back while the saddle fitter or saddle ergonomist records the angles. It's also used to ensure that a saddle is properly refitted to accommodate the horse's back shape.

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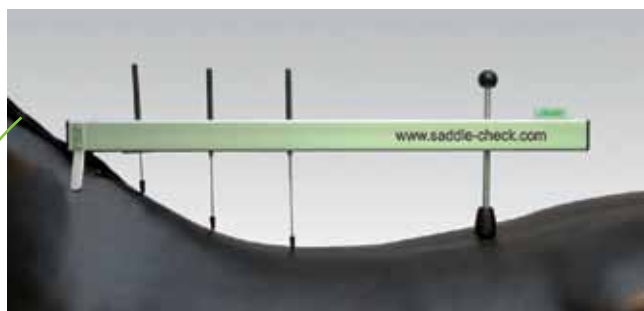
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- A couple of other devices are commercially available (only in Europe at this point) to ascertain the shape of the horse's back, but they are somewhat convoluted and unwieldy and there are several kinks to be worked out before they are acceptable for general use. The **TOPOGRAPHER®** by EquiScan consists of 11 individually-moving sectioned arms that are laid across the horse's back. Each individual number on each segment is recorded. Until this can be done automatically/electronically, however, it becomes prohibitive (timewise), although the results are very accurate.






- A device called the **BVFR**, which determines the horse's topline, is approved by the Association of Saddlers and Harness Makers in Germany. But since this device always needs to be used in conjunction with another device to determine the actual shape of the saddle support area, it becomes a bit complicated to use accurately.



The LWT (Leather Withers Tracer) by Schleese determines the shape of the withers and shoulder muscles.

## TOOLS DON'T NEGATE KNOWLEDGE

I prefer the simple Sprenger Withers Gauge to determine withers shape and angle and ensure enough room at the pommel of the saddle; and a combination of the Arc Device, a LWT (Leather Withers Tracer) and the HorseShape Laser (if the client asks) to determine the three-dimensional shape of the horse's back and saddle support area.

In the end, though, it is still a matter of working with someone who knows what they're doing to ensure proper saddle fit for you and your horse – regardless of the devices available to make this “easier”. There are no shortcuts to expertise! 

**Jochen Schleese** is a Certified Master Saddler who graduated from Passier and came to Canada as Official Saddler at the 1986 World Dressage Championships. He registered the trade of saddlery in North America in 1990. Jochen's lifelong study of equine development, saddle design, the biomechanics of horse and rider in motion, and the effects of ill-fitting saddles, led to the establishment of Saddlefit 4 Life in 2005 ([saddlefit4life.com](http://saddlefit4life.com)), a global network of equine professionals dedicated to protecting horse and rider from long term damage.

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