

## Fitting the Saddle to the Rider

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When you are in the market to purchase a saddle, you want to ensure that the saddle you are investing in will not only fit your horse, but will also fit you. If you have ridden in more than one saddle in your riding career, you probably noticed that there were subtle or major differences in each saddle. When you spend your dollars, you want a saddle that you and your horse will enjoy for years to come.

The most obvious differences are the length of the seat from pommel to cantle to accommodate the rider, and the width of the tree to accommodate the horse, but this is only the beginning. You also need to decide on flap length, twist, seat width, thigh rolls or blocks, seat depth, stirrup bar placement, and the number and length of the billets. But saddle fit to the rider goes way beyond these obvious attributes; it is most important that the saddle is "gender correct." A woman should not be riding in a saddle that is made for a man, and vice versa. This statement is based on simple anatomical differences that absolutely must be taken into consideration in saddle design and saddle fit. Without going into human anatomy in great detail, suffice it to say that in addition to those points mentioned above (which are different for both men and women), you should also consider whether or not there is enough support behind the gluteal muscles to allow you to sit straight and allow the natural shock absorbers in the four natural curves of your spine to work properly. You should think about



*The saddle should fit the rider and be 'gender correct' - a woman should not ride in a saddle made for a man and vice versa.*

being able to sit in comfort on your seat bones without having your pubic symphysis hitting the pommel area.

Although many saddle makers and fitters feel that the primary concern is finding what works for your horse, we disagree. If you as the rider are not comfortable in your saddle, this discomfort will translate down to your horse and prevent both of you from ever reaching peak performance potential. So for the sake of this article, let's disregard the key points of saddle fit to the horse, and concentrate on the topic, "fitting the saddle to the rider."

Although we advocate riding in as many saddles as possible to develop feel for the features you like or dislike in a saddle, we also recognize that sometimes, you just don't know what you just don't know. Often riders will have grown up riding in saddles that were wrong for them regardless how well they fit the horse, and were simply told to "suck it up." Male trainers have no empathy for the pain female riders can be experiencing in a particular saddle. This brings back the old argument: Who's built best to ride, male or female? We have sent several of our female staff who were not already riders/horse owners to a local riding stable to take lessons – and the inevitable stories reflect the fact that when the teacher wasn't watching, they would slouch in the saddle to escape the pain in the crotch caused by these poorly fitting saddles.

Of course, many saddles are still bought in the tack shop, but sitting in a saddle on a plastic mold or a stationary horse is not the same as riding a moving animal. It is crucial to be able to try out several models on the horse – moving in all three gaits and in both directions. Riding will allow the rider to become aware of where the seat bones are, how the pelvis is tilted, how wide the saddle is between the upper inner thighs (twist), and whether there is enough support in the seat foam behind the rider's gluteus maximus to support the position without causing backaches. Preferences as to size, placement, and style of thigh rolls will become evident. Being aware of your body and how it feels and moves is crucial to deciding on the saddle.

For more information visit [www.saddlesforwomen.com](http://www.saddlesforwomen.com) or read *Suffering in Silence: The Saddle Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses*.

*Jochen Schleese, Certified Master Saddler, Equine Ergonomist, is a leader in the concept of saddle fit, and teaches his Saddlefit 4 Life® philosophy worldwide. He is also the author of Suffering in Silence, The Saddle-Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses.*

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