JUMPING AHEAD of the Competition!

Kate Brown, four-star eventer, understands the value of proper saddle fit.

SADDLE FIT AND JUMPING SADDLES

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, CEE, CSFT

The art and science of saddle fit has become part of the consciousness of caring for your horse, working together with every equine professional who is part of the "circle of influence" around horse and rider. Traditionally, dressage riders and endurance riders have been the most concerned with having a properly fitting saddle because in these disciplines it is imperative that horses and riders are comfortable, otherwise performance can be visibly impacted.

The design of jumping saddles has been primarily dictated by a certain "look" that especially hunters want to achieve; little attention has been paid to a) whether these saddles actually are anatomically correct for the rider, and b) whether they actually fit the horse. If you look closely at many jumping saddles, you will discover that they often have very narrow gullet channels and non-adjustable panels made of felt or wool. The paradox is that the "close contact" the rider wants to achieve becomes pretty much non-existent after keyhole rubber pads and other saddle pads are added. Very rarely will you find a truly adjustable jumping saddle that can be fitted in the flocking, as well as adjusted in the tree width and angle to accommodate the shoulder angle and necessary room around the withers.

Hunter/jumper saddles are often placed far forward on the horse's back, which is good, because you generally do want to sit as close to the withers as possible as this is where the horse's back "swings" the least. This is also undesirable, because often in achieving this, the tree points are actually placed on or over the shoulder blade. This impacts the horse's freedom of movement over the shoulders, and shortens his stride and ability to actually jump. In addition, instead of allowing the rider a balanced seat, the pommel will be much higher than the cantle, thus the need for multiple pads to bring the back of the saddle level again. Most riders prefer the jumping saddle to be center-balanced.

Particularly the shape and position of the gullet plate, the stiffest and most stable part of the saddle, needs to accommodate the natural asymmetry (i.e., usually the left shoulder is bigger, higher and further back) in the horse's anatomy during saddle fitting. Its necessary function cannot be substituted or eliminated by re-flocking, shimming, or the use of other special orthotics in the panel area. Because of the common occurrence of the unevenness at the horse's shoulders, it will usually be necessary to fit the gullet plate asymmetrically in order to achieve this necessary support equally well on both sides, and allowing the required freedom of movement for both shoulders equally. If this crucial piece of saddle fitting is ignored, and a saddle with a symmetrical gullet plate is put on a horse's back, it will inevitably fall to one side as it is pushed there by the more heavily muscled shoulder, usually the left, twisting the saddle to the right. This can often be seen in photos taken from behind where the saddle which seems to have slipped to the right.

There are many obvious visual manifestations of poor saddle fit, some will be deemed behavioral issues; some are actu-

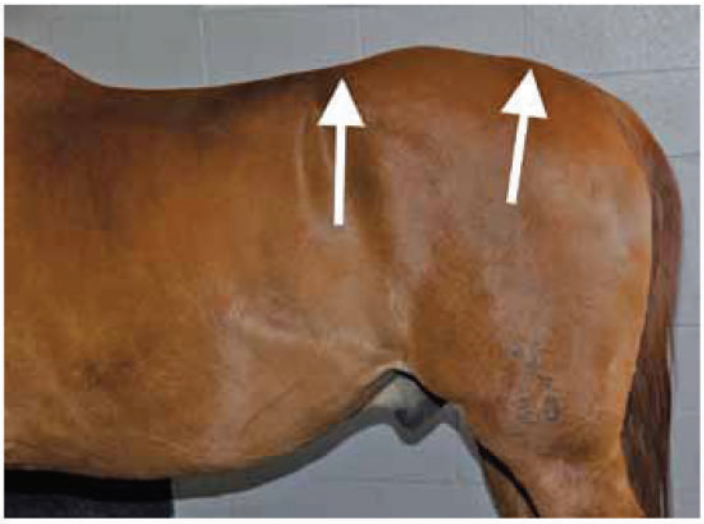
Horses should not experience discomfort, pain and irreparable damage caused by ill-fitting tack, due to lack of knowledge. Nothing compares to the feeling you experience when you know you have helped your best friend!" – Jochen Schleese

ally physiological. Bucking, refusing to jump, stumbling, tripping and not rounding the back can be caused by the saddle impacting some of the reflex points. The so-called "hunter's bump" or a dip behind the withers (due to severe muscle atrophy) is often seen in hunter/jumpers.

It would seem necessary, especially in hunter/jumpers, where the ability to move freely in order to jump is key, to have a saddle that can be adjusted over the course of the horse's life, as he matures and changes conformation over the years. Instead, we find remedial fitting practices using more and more shims and pads, or simply replacing saddle after saddle.

Check the fit of your saddle(s) using the nine-point checklist and following along with the YouTube videos at www.saddlesforwomen.com.

Would you like to learn more about saddle fit and equine ergonomics? Visit www.saddlefit4life.com for a range of educational programs, from one-day seminars to a five-day intensive study of equine ergonomics. Symptomatic lameness, abnormal gaits, four-beat canter, stumbling, tail swishing, poor work attitude, sensitive back, resistance and lack of engagement. Riders in the wrong saddle can experience back and hip pain, pelvic discomfort, struggling for position and feeling pulled apart. ☐



Hunter's bump, the visible results of a saddle too long for the horse. Too much pressure at and behind the 18th lumbar vertebra.

About the Author

Former German three-day event rider, equine ergonomist Jochen Schleese CMC CSFT CEE was the 1986 Official Saddler for the World Dressage Championships held in Toronto, and 2005, 2007 and 2009 World Cup Dressage and Jumping Finals in Las Vegas. Jochen is a guest speaker at veterinary associations and schools and riding instructor conferences worldwide. He is the founder of Saddlefit 4 Life®, a global network of certified equine professionals dedicated to the comfort and protection of the horse, and also established the HIPPOH Foundation (Horse Industry Professionals Protecting our Horses) in California in 2010. Jochen is the author of 'The Silent Killer' (2012) and 'Suffering in Silence –The Saddle Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses' (2013).

Jochen Schleese, Certified Master Saddler and Certified Equine and Saddle Ergonomist, determines saddle support area for a horse.