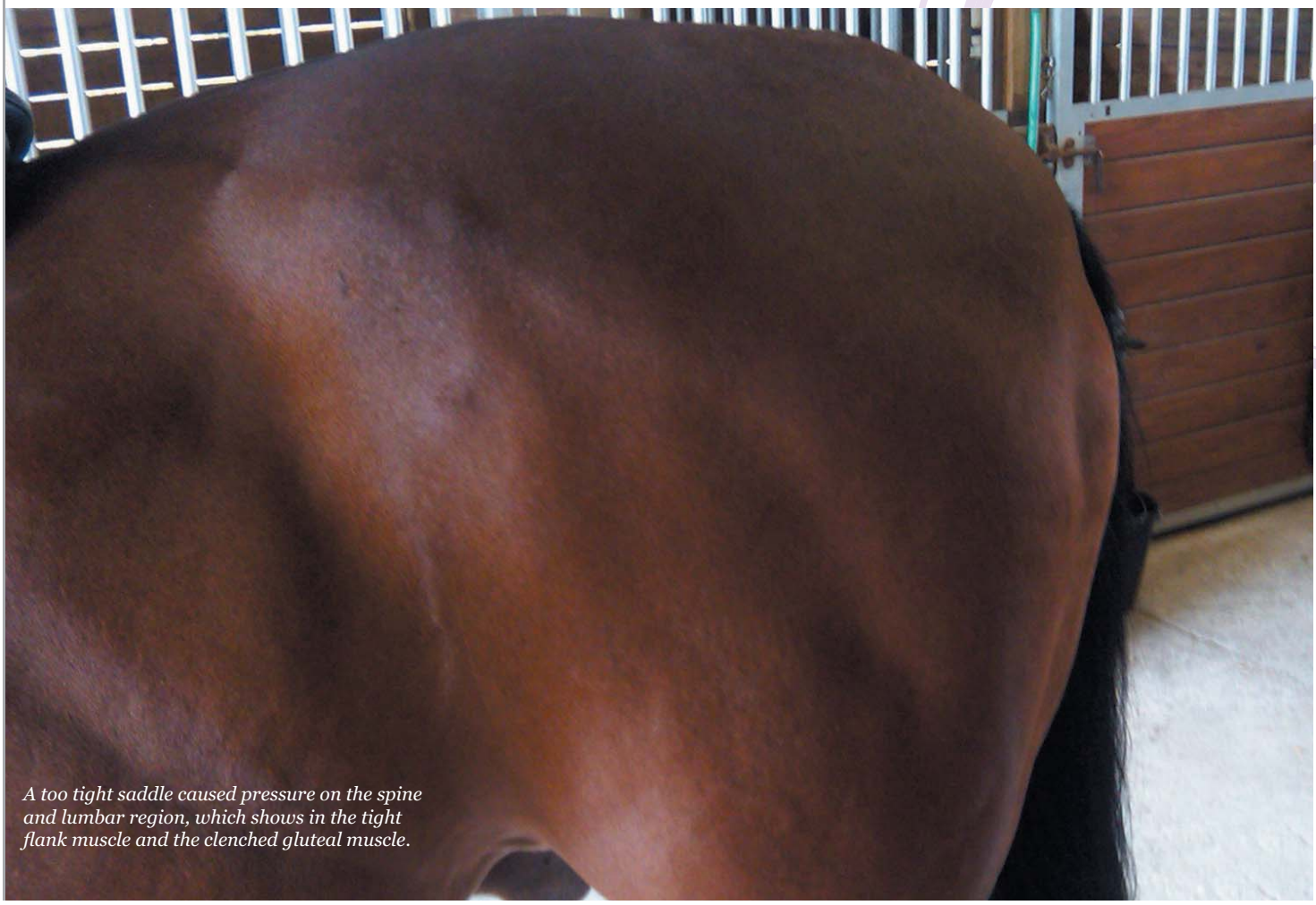
A tale of TWO SADDLES

by Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CEE



A too tight saddle caused pressure on the spine and lumbar region, which shows in the tight flank muscle and the clenched gluteal muscle.

I recently went out to recheck the fit of one of our saddles that a client bought for her horse as part of her usual annual maintenance cycle, and what I experienced there truly troubled me to the point that I had to write about it. Bad saddle fit and ignorance can really do damage to a horse – physically and mentally.

AT FIRST GLANCE

The owner and the trainer were both not present (*this is an important point – during a saddle fit evaluation it is actually crucial that these key players should be there – first of all to determine any 'unusual' circumstances and secondly to be part of the analytic exercise to establish proper fit*).

As the groom brought out a lovely, but very sad, little horse, I had to look twice – at first glance, I didn't recognize him as the same horse from our previous saddle fitting session and the measurements I had on file. I have rarely encountered such a pathetic picture of absolute dejection; this horse was clearly suffering. Saddle fit was being blamed, and I was completely flabbergasted that apparently one of our saddles could cause such obvious damage.

However, as it turns out, the owner herself wasn't riding the horse more than twice a month. Instead, he was being ridden regularly by her trainer, who was using his own saddle (a different brand) on the horse. A common situation – his saddle fit **him** great, but was not necessarily the right fit for the horses he was using it on. So it was actually the trainer's saddle, and not this horse's fitted saddle, that was causing the problems. I took a look at that saddle, and suddenly it became clear why this poor horse was the picture of abject misery.

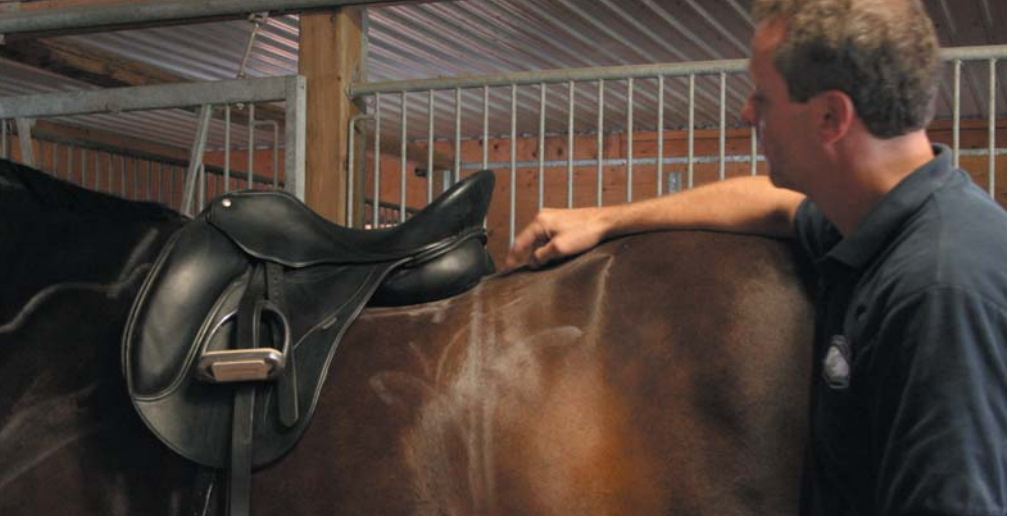
SADDLE MIS-FIT

Firstly, the trainer's saddle had a gullet channel that was clearly much too narrow – two fingers at most for a spine that clearly needed a minimum of four fingers width for its entire length. Result: pinching of the spinal processes, and nerve damage on the back. When placed on the horse's back this saddle was certainly not within the confines of the saddle support area of this fairly short backed horse. (The saddle support area of the horse starts behind the withers and ends *before* the last floating rib of the horse).

Check out our YouTube video on this topic as well as the other 8 points of saddle fit to do your own diagnostic evaluation before you meet with a saddle fitter. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ei4nv-ltSA&feature=relmfu

According to Certified Equine Massage Therapist Lisa Carter, "I see many horses with rotated scapulas. The #1 cause for this condition is a saddle that is too narrow. With each stride, as the horse's forelimb moves upward/forward, the upper part of the scapula

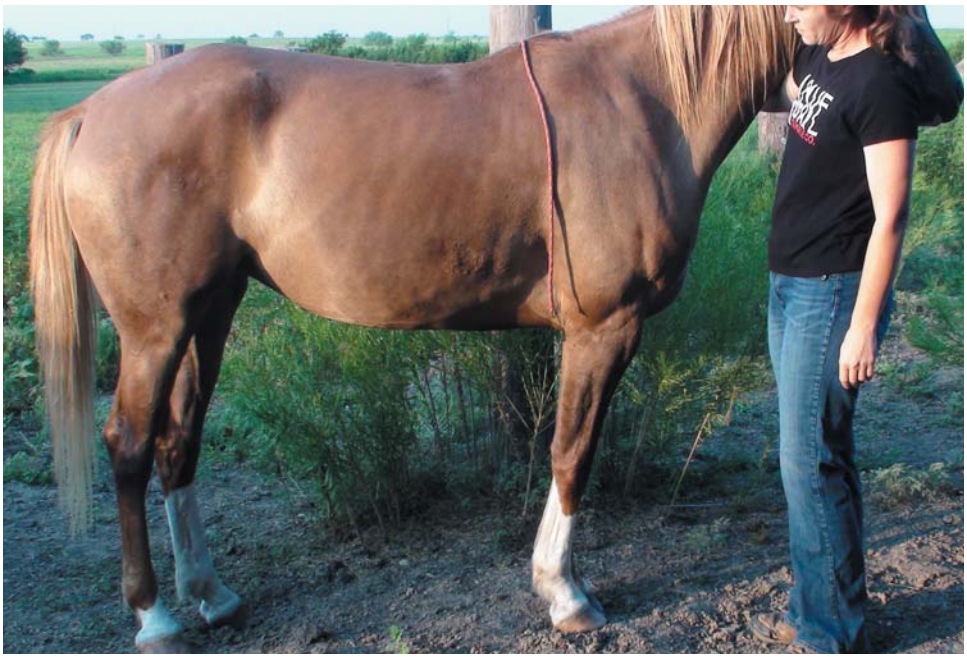
When the stallion bites the mare at the withers (pinching cranial nerve 11, like the 'vise' grip of Spock!) to immobilize her during mating, the instinctive reaction is for her to stand still – her back drops, and her pelvis rotates to receive the stallion. If you have a saddle that effects this same pinching, the instinct will be for the horse not to move. You have a rider sitting on her, however, driving her forward, and getting angry when she resists. She is torn between instinct and obedience...



The saddle support area of the horse starts behind the withers and ends before the last floating rib of the horse

moves backward, toward the saddle. As the forelimb moves downward/ backward, the scapula moves forward. When the horse's foreleg comes up, the scapula can move backward by 4 or 5 inches. When the saddle is too narrow, the ***scapula gets pinched*** by the tree of the saddle, causing great pain for the horse as the saddle tree digs into scapular bone. In an attempt to move away from the pain, the horse rotates the scapula. When the scapulas are rotated, the horse cannot be athletic. The stride is considerably shortened and range of motion is reduced when the movement of the scapula is impeded. When the condition is present for an extended period of time, the scapula can remain in that position even after the saddle is removed due to muscle memory taking over. It can be corrected by first taking care of the original cause of the condition – i.e. bad saddle fit, and then you would use massage, bodywork exercises and stretches to help overcome the muscle memory and bring the body back into proper balance. Most people have seen horses with white spots on either side of the withers. This is caused by the saddle pressing against the moving scapula. Unfortunately, adding extra padding does not help with saddles that are too narrow. It's like putting extra layers of socks on your feet to ease the pain of boots that are too small."

Lisa Carter continues, "When a saddle tree is too narrow along the length of the back and/or too long and it digs into the lumbar region of the horse's back, he is forced to "dip" his back away from the offending saddle. This interferes with the most crucial aspect of the performance horse – collection. In order to collect, the horse must lift and round his back. When the saddle gets in the way, the horse is forced into a "U" shape. The head comes up, the base of the neck juts out, the back arches, and in turn the front of the pelvis is forced downward and the hip is forced into a more extended position, which causes the hind legs to splay out behind. This posture is very bad for the stifle and hock and can cause problems later on down the road such as fixated patella, or a locking stifle, and joint problems. Over time, a wasting appearance of the muscles of the topline (neck, back and rump) will take place as the core muscles are no longer engaging properly."



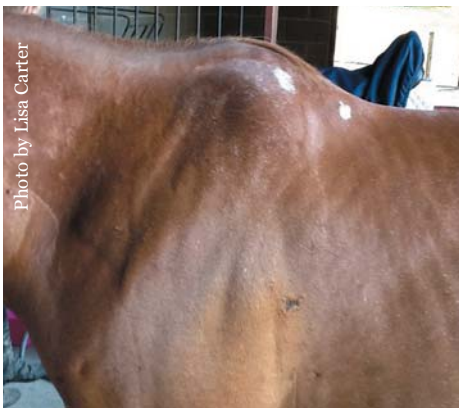


Photo by Lisa Carter

Above: Normal scapula

Left: Rotated scapula

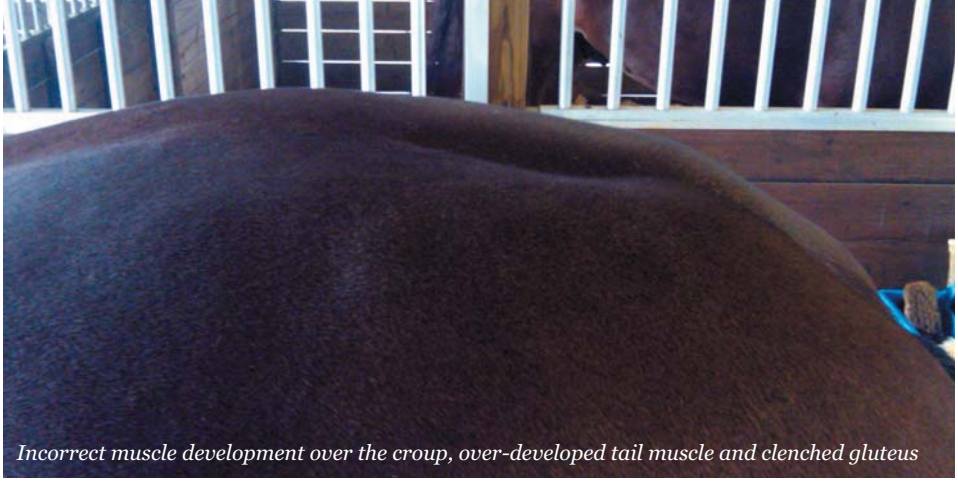
I suspect that if the trainer doesn't position the saddle behind the scapulas, the saddle will no doubt slide up on the scapulas because this is a common result of saddles too long for horses' backs. This can, of course do all manner of damage to the scapula, causing cartilage damage at worst, and not allowing the horse to move freely at least.

The poor state this animal was in saddened me; there was no more life in his eyes, and there was obvious damage to his back as is shown in the pictures.

SIGNS OF PAIN

What truly made me sad (and angry at the same time) was hearing that the horse was on the market to be sold because he was just 'too much' for the owner to handle. The horse was showing "behavioral" issues, running off with his riders, being resistant to the aids, and generally not performing well. These behaviors are signs of pain. Flight is an understandable reaction because the horse simply wants to escape and avoid the pain of having to be ridden in something that doesn't fit him.

So many times, much of what your horse is trying to tell you (and horses cannot lie) is communicated through behavior. We can learn, through their actions and reactions, what they have to deal with on a daily basis – if we pay attention to them. Most of them



Incorrect muscle development over the croup, over-developed tail muscle and clenched gluteus

simply become numb to what is happening and perform in spite of us. Others become a saleable, disposable commodity because the owner can't deal with the behavior.

This experience reassures me that I have to keep educating the trainers and the other equine professionals to recognize signs of pain associated with poorly fitted saddles.

Secondly, the trainer's saddle was much too long for this horse. The panels went way past the saddle support area, causing all sorts of difficulty for this horse's back.

About the author:
Equine Ergonomist Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CEE was the 1986 Official Saddler for the World Dressage Championships held in Toronto. Jochen is a guest speaker at veterinary associations and schools, and riding instructor conferences worldwide. He is the founder of Saddlefit4Life®, a global network of equine professionals dedicated to the comfort and protection of the horse, and also established HIPPOH Foundation (Horse Industry Professionals Protecting Our Horses) in California in 2010.
www.saddlesforwomen.com
www.saddlefit4life.com
www.hippohfoundation.org