Divergent Theories on Saddle Fitting

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THERE ARE MANY OPINIONS ON SADDLE FITTING. Occasionally riders say, "I have used my saddle for *x* years. It fits me perfectly and every horse I ride." I bite my tongue and manage to smile and say, "Lucky you." These people don't realize the possible damage they are doing to themselves and their horses.

Many saddle fitters maintain that a saddle should have a narrow channel, sitting on the spinous processes and ligaments. The tree is long and flat (on the shoulder and lumbar area) with minimal weight-bearing surface on the musculature. The saddle barely moves because it sits on the spine (other than twisting during motion when "kicked back" by the bigger shoulder). It rarely needs adjusting because bone structure and ligaments don't change conformation through training like muscles do—and the muscles really won't change because the horse is not able to use his muscles properly with a saddle that fits like this.

The disadvantage is that the spine and ligaments don't tolerate prolonged compression and the horse's back movement is restricted. To protect his shoulder, lumbar region, and spine, the horse gets tighter in his back (especially the lumbar area), with cramping in the gluteus maximus muscle. A dip develops in front of his sacroiliac (SI) joint and the glutes seize up and atrophy between the SI joint and the tail. The horse's head pushes down the base of his neck and "breaks" over the third cervical vertebra (C_3) to get on the bit. It's difficult for the rider to get the horse supple through the poll with the highest point at the poll and not at C_3. Eventually, the atrophy in the back muscles and compression of the spine will lead to permanent damage.

The other theory (better!) is for the saddle to stay off the spine, lumbar vertebrae, and shoulders— while maximizing the surface area the saddle sits on. The saddle support area is on the weight-bearing longissimus dorsi. It stays away from the reflex points that create negative behavior or negative conformation and health issues, keeping the back muscles loose and supple.

If your horse has been in ill-fitting saddles in the past that have caused back pain, don't worry if he or she has muscle soreness after switching to a saddle fitted properly, as this is good pain. R

Above left. Jochen demonstrates some of the key reflex points that can be affected by poorly fitting saddles—especially cranial nerve 11. **Top**. This top view of the horse's back shows the saddle support area as well as the red 'triangle of doom' that should always be kept clear of pressure behind the wither area. **Middle**. Checking shoulder angle: the wither gauge is used to determine not only correct width but also the angle that the gullet plate needs to mimic. **Bottom**. Example of the negative effects of a theory #1 fitting saddle. Dip in front of SI, atrophy between SI and tail.