

# SADDLE FIT

## for Women

### What you need to know if you're a woman looking to buy a saddle

Riding should not hurt. Unfortunately, many women are riding in saddles that have been made for men. They're suffering in silence, tolerating the pain because they simply may not know what they don't know.

Saddle fitters should have a basic understanding of equine biomechanics and how saddles need to fit to prevent long-term back damage in the horse. What many may be lacking is a realization that female anatomy can impact saddle fit. Several key points need to be addressed when determining proper saddle fit for women.

#### TWIST AND THIGH

The twist is the part of the saddle that touches the upper inner thighs. The width between the upper inner thighs affects the width of the twist of the saddle. Because of a phenomenon called

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"Qflexion" (female thighs tend to angle outwards at the hip and inwards at the knee), women will carry more weight on







their upper inner thighs than men.

When a woman sits on a male saddle that is too wide between her upper inner thighs, her leg is pushed forward, and her knees and toes are out at a 45-degree angle. The position results in a leg that goes out and forward, and it is difficult to achieve the 'shoulder-hips-heels' straight line. This is different when a woman sits on a female saddle, allowing the toes to point forward while leaving more upper leg on the barrel or sides of the horse.

#### LEG LENGTH RATIO

Most women have a longer upper leg than a lower leg. The ratio of the length of the upper leg to the length of the lower leg will determine

	FEMALE	MALE
<b>Birth Channel</b>	Yes 	No 
<b>Pelvic Structure</b>	Wide 	Narrow 
<b>Spinal Column</b>	Hollow back 	Relatively straight (with respect to lumbar area) 

	FEMALE	MALE
<b>Balance Point* of Pelvis</b>	Farther forward Shorter pubic symphysis 	Middle of pelvis (on seat bones) Higher pubic symphysis 
<b>Pubic Symphysis</b>	Fairly flat and low—will hit the pommel area 	Relatively higher than female pubic symphysis with steeper angles Will sit far away from pommel area 
<b>Hip Joints</b>	Articulation is angled to the side Shorter tail bone 	Articulation straight, allowing the leg to hang straight Longer tail bone 

the position and/or length of the stirrup bar. The analogy here is that the stirrup bar acts like the fulcrum and the stirrup leather is the pendulum. With a regular stirrup bar positioned normally, the female's leg will usually end up being too far forward ("Legs back, ladies!") because the leg will fall according to its centre of gravity. Therefore, for women, an extended stirrup bar (or sometimes even an extra-extended stirrup bar) which allows the stirrup leathers to be positioned further back will ensure that the leg hangs in the correct position. Most men have pretty equal leg lengths so they do fine with the normal stirrup bar length and position.

## HIPS AND FLAPS

Women's hip bones are articulated onto the pelvis at the joint differently than those of men. Especially female adult amateur riders, who started riding later in life or who don't ride regularly, are challenged to have their legs hang straight, because the articulation causes the legs to naturally angle out. Changing the angle of the flap and possibly also the position of the thigh roll can address this with a female saddle. If the flap is too straight, the knee comes too close to the front of the flap, and in motion the leg will actually go over the flap. Forcing this ("Legs back!"—again!) can move the pelvis forward, resulting in back pain or discomfort. Proper flap positioning is another small point in accommodating the female anatomy in saddle design.

## SEAT WIDTH

Many saddle fit mistakes occur during measurement of the width of the twist (as previously discussed) and the width of the seat.

Whereas the twist is that area of the saddle which is actually located between your thighs, the width of the seat is determined by the space between the seam running along the outer edge of the seat. In the male pelvis, the seat bones are much closer together and the distance between the two seat bones is much smaller. Therefore, he fits into the padded part of most saddles very comfortably.

In the female pelvis, the seat bones are much further apart, which means that if she is riding in a 'male' saddle, she will likely be sitting on the seat seaming, which is generally pretty uncomfortable. Often, seat twist and seat width are mixed up, and she will end up buying a saddle with a wide twist rather than the wide seat she needs to accommodate her pelvic shape. As a result, the knees and hips will angle out instead of being able to hang straight down and she will not sit comfortably for both reasons—the twist is too wide, and the seat is too narrow.

You need to look at the distance between the seams on the seat, which should be wide enough to allow the female seat bones to sit on the padding. If this is too narrow, it feels like you're sitting on a ridge, or that your seat bones are falling off the edge of the seat.

## PERPENDICULARITY

Another area of consideration is the position of the pelvis itself. The male pelvis has a relatively higher pubic symphysis (ps)—when he sits in a balanced position with his spine perpendicular to the ground on the saddle, his ps will be tipped upward and not in contact with anything. In contrast, when the female sits on the

*continued on page 13*

	FEMALE	MALE
<b>Upper Leg</b>	<p>Femur is bigger on top and gets narrower down the knee</p> <p>Articulation at joint has wider angle, which makes it difficult for the leg to hang straight</p> 	<p>Femur remains pretty much same thickness from top to bottom</p> <p>Articulation angle relatively smaller, allowing leg to hang straight</p> 
<b>Quadriceps and Hamstrings</b>	<p>Muscle looks rounder when viewed from front—not much "space" visible between legs</p> 	<p>Quadriceps and hamstrings more defined on front and back of leg (less on sides), which leaves more room between the legs at the top</p> 
<b>Seat Bones</b>	<p>Farther apart to accommodate birth canal</p> 	<p>Closer together</p> 

## SADDLE FIT *continued from page 7*

saddle with her spine perpendicular to the ground, her ps is much lower and closer to front of saddle—to the point of contact and rubbing. When a male rider sits on a male saddle, he can balance on his seat bones as on a bipod, whereas the female finds her balance on a male saddle in a tripod position—which means her ps will be in contact with the front of the saddle.

## BUTT HEIGHT

The last area of consideration is the ever-popular gluteus maximus muscles. A female's 'butt cheeks' are generally higher placed than those of a male, and will benefit from added support or 'push' from behind. This can be accomplished with the use of additional padding in the seat foam to allow the woman to maintain a proper seat without collapsing at the hip and resulting in a chair seat.

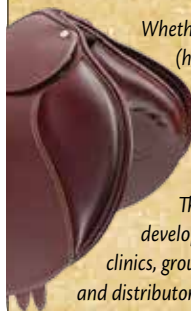
So, ladies, don't let the 'women's equality' mentality dictate your saddle choice. Settling for a 'male' saddle could translate into potential discomfort for your horse and an uncomfortable ride for you. ♦

*Certified Master Saddler and Equine Ergonomist Jochen Schleese came to Canada as Official Saddler for the 1986 World Dressage Championships. He has won numerous industry and business awards and been profiled twice on Discovery Channel. He teaches saddle fitting all over the world and has recently released his first book, *Suffering in Silence: The saddle fit link to physical and psychological trauma in horses*. Learn more at [www.saddlesforwomen.com](http://www.saddlesforwomen.com) and [www.saddlefit4life.com](http://www.saddlefit4life.com)*



## Before You Buy a Saddle...

*Finding a saddle that properly fits the rider and allows proper contact with the horse is important for an enjoyable and effective ride. Begin your search with what works for your horse as the primary concern, but remember that it is just as important for the saddle to suit the rider as it is for the saddle to suit the horse.*



*Whether male or female, each rider's physical characteristics (height, weight, build and core strength) are unique. Some people like more room to move, some want to have more support, some prefer a small block ... the combinations and opinions are endless.*

*The best advice is to ride in as many saddles as possible to develop feel for the features that you do or do not like. Riding clinics, group saddle fittings, trade shows with several saddle makers and distributors are excellent places to begin to do your research. Talk to several fitters, particularly those who deal with your chosen discipline, as they will be excellent sources of information and will help you to develop that 'feel'.*

*Each saddle maker will have their own philosophy and feature that make the product unique. You will know when you find someone who is truly knowledgeable and trustworthy to guide you in finding that perfect saddle that fits. Take the time to evaluate saddles before buying. You and your horse will perform the better for it.*

