## Saddle fit and the GROWING horse\*



A – straight tree points are marginally better than forward facing tree points when it comes to interference with the scapular cartilage, as seen in B – forward facing tree points can cause chipping at the scapular cartilage. Ideal situation is in C with rear facing tree points that mimic the angle of the shoulder. Diagram D (below) shows the different growth phases of the horse at various ages – the withers shape changes and the muscular definition and profile expands.

With complex physiological issues, veterinarians may recommend treatments to alleviate symptoms. The horse benefits greatly when the healthcare team works together, combining knowledge to understand underlying factors. This series discusses concepts to assist professionals in the diagnostic process.

Expensive "custom" saddles are often purchased with the expectation that they should fit the horse forever. This is not the case, since horses change their conformation many times during their lives. Key areas on the saddle may result in a symptomatic refusal to move forward.

Wither clearance is an often misunderstood concept. Many of us learned in Pony Club that our saddle should have two to three fingers clearance on the top of the withers, but were never taught there also had to be clearance on the sides. This is crucial because when the horse moves, his shoulder blades rotate upwards and backwards.

To see how far the horse's shoulder blade rotates back when he moves, stand to his side and mark the shoulder blade with a piece of chalk. Have someone stretch the horse's front leg forward, and mark the new position of the shoulder blade to show the rider how much farther back it is.



Ideally, there should be two to three fingers clearance on both the top and sides of the withers, as measured from the point just above where the saddle's stuffing starts. On a mutton-withered horse it may be as much as four to five fingers clearance.

No clearance at the side means the horse's movement will be restricted; he won't have free range of movement through his shoulders, resulting in reluctance to go forward. More extreme signs of insufficient wither clearance are patches of white hairs or sores on the top or sides of the withers.

A reluctance to move forward can also be due to saddle tree points – specifically their direction! Forward-facing tree points are extremely detrimental; MRIs and fiber optic cameras have shown the chipping of cartilage that can occur on the scapular bone. Every single extension of the foreleg will cause contact with these tree points – and cause eventual damage at the skeletal level.

Straight or perpendicular tree points are somewhat better, but still cause contact at the scapula, especially during extended movement of the leg or during jumping. The tree with rearfacing points is best; these mimic the scapular angle and allow maximum freedom of movement at the shoulder.

## \*Part 2 of "Symptomatic Lameness" will appear in the Spring issue.



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