

HORSE, HEALTH & HOME

SADDLE FITTING

Male Saddle. Female Saddle. *What's the difference?*

Poorly fitting saddles cause poor position, discomfort, and pain for both horse and rider

HORSE HEALTH

Expert advice

By Jochen Schleese

Certified Master Saddler, Saddle Ergonomist

Some riders seem to have had an inherent ability to ride, excelling in their discipline to become FEI riders and trainers. Others seem to have similar advantages – a good horse, natural athletic ability, discipline to train, and yet – something is missing.

Over 25 years ago, several of my female clients first came to me to find solutions to issues they were experiencing as riders – repeated urinary tract infections, hip, knee and back issues and pain in the pelvic area.

I was puzzled that these maladies generally escaped male riders, but I figured that it must be due to the differences between the male and female pelvis and their interaction with the saddle.

On examining many 'butt casts' and the comparative muscular / skeletal structures, I then reflected on how these differences related to riding ability – often women struggled to maintain position, whereas men rode with relative ease.

MALE SADDLE. FEMALE SADDLE. WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Position and balance of the rider are the key ingredients in all riding disciplines because the majority of time is spent sitting. The seat bones are the key structure for the foundation of position and balance.

Women experience difficulty achieving the classic "shoulders-hips-heels" straight line (especially in dressage) because the pelvis is balanced differently and the articulation of female hips is different from that of men.

It is painful for a female rider to sit straight only on her seat bones because her pubic bone will hit the

pommel area in the front of the saddle; as a result most women 'collapse' at the hip to escape the pain. The leg shoots forward, and women fight the saddle for correct position instead of concentrating on riding.

For men, this does not provide the challenge it does for many women. Men have two 'V' shaped seat bones set close together, giving them a bipod axis. Saddle manufacturers have traditionally afforded special attention to the male skeletal structure.

Unfortunately, too many women ride in saddles built for men – a main reason for their issues. Women have a broad range of hip shapes, all of which need to be accommodated when constructing a saddle.

Unlike the 'V' shaped man's seat bones, women's are usually flatter. Women have a more prominent pubic bone with a lower pubic symphysis. Their tail bones are longer, and their gluteus muscles generally higher than a man's. The combination of skeletal structures causes women to sit on a tripod.

Herein lies the problem for most women – unless the pelvis is straight, the pommel of the saddle interferes with the pubic bone. Unless the abdominal muscles are used, it is almost impossible for a woman to sit correctly in a saddle which was built for a man, especially because the 'male' saddle will also lack the necessary support from behind – causing her to 'scoot back' to find the support she needs.

The traditional 'male' saddles are built fairly wide through the crotch area (twist) but are narrow in the seat. Women find themselves sitting with their legs pushed outwards from the hip, and perching painfully on the seat seaming. Female anatomy dictates the saddle for women should be exactly opposite – narrow in the crotch area and wider in the seat area.

The width between the upper inner thighs affects the width of the twist needed in the saddle. The twist

is that part of the saddle where the upper inner thighs sit against.

Because of a phenomenon called "Qflexion" (whereby female thighs tend to angle outwards at the hip and back inwards at the knee), women will carry more weight on their upper inner thigh than a man. The leg is pushed forward, and the knee and toes are out at 45 degree angle when a woman sits on a male saddle that is too wide between her upper inner thighs.

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 you see a woman on a female saddle, where the toes point forward and there is more upper leg on the barrel or sides of the horse.

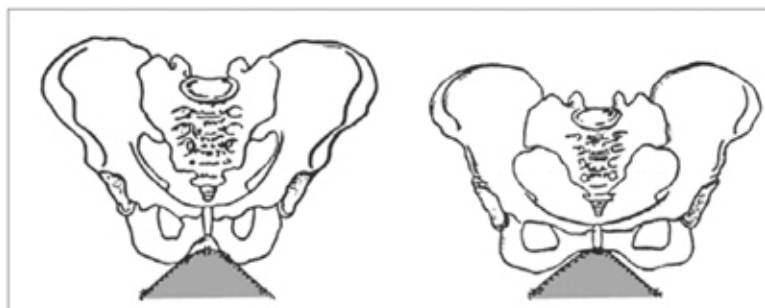
The ratio of the length of the upper leg to the length of the lower leg will determine the position and/or length of the stirrup bar. Most women have a longer upper leg than a lower leg.

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 ("get your leg back!" – does this sound familiar?) because the leg will fall according to its centre of gravity.

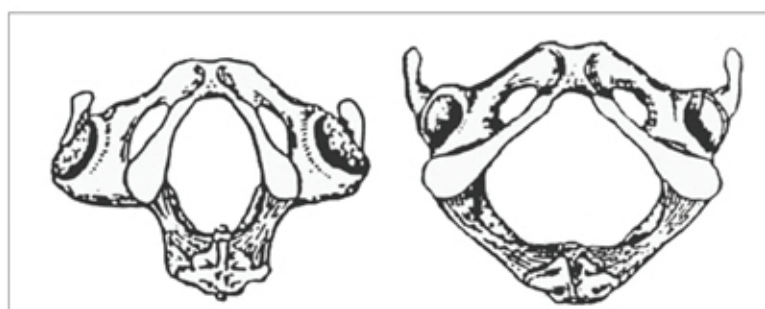
Therefore for women, an extended stirrup bar (or sometimes even an extra-extended stirrup bar!) allowing the stirrup leathers to be positioned further back will ensure that the leg hangs in the correct position. Most men have pretty equal leg lengths so that they do fine with the normal stirrup bar length and position.

Women's hip bones are articulated onto the pelvis at the joint differently. 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.

Men's legs hang straight natu-



This shows how a male pelvic bone (left) differs from a female's (right).



A bottom view of the differences between the male (left) and female pelvic bones.

rally, but 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 ("get your leg back!" – again!) can move the pelvis forward, resulting in back pain and discomfort. Proper flap positioning is another small point in accommodating the female anatomy in saddle design.

One of the areas in saddle where the most mistakes occur during measurement is the width of the twist and the width of the seat. The width of the seat is determined by the space between the seam running along the 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 pretty much most saddles very comfortably.

The female pelvis has the seat bones 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 this 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 (remember, the twist is that area between the thighs), 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.



This diagram shows how a male pelvic typically sits in a English saddle



And this diagram shows how a female pelvic typically sits in a English saddle



Using plaster of paris, Jochen Schleese has been able to determine the pressure point differences between men (right) and women.