



PLUS SIZE

By JOCHEN SCHLEESE, CERTIFIED MASTER SADDLER

FINDING A SADDLE FOR YOUR WIDER HORSE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A CHALLENGE. HERE ARE THE TWO MAIN POINTS OF CONCERN.

Anyone who has ever owned a pony or wider horse knows the trials and tribulations of finding a saddle to fit these Thelwell lookalikes. Many people end up breaking out the special saddle pads, cruppers and breastplates in an effort to keep their saddles in place.

There are several considerations when fitting a saddle for a wide-backed horse, but the key ones to keep in mind are tree width and angle. Most riders are aware that saddle trees come in narrow, medium or wide, but these designations can refer both to the width and the angle of the tree. If the saddle is a "wide narrow", this means the saddle has a wide tree width and a narrow tree angle.

TREE ANGLE AND SHOULDER MOVEMENT

It is important that the saddle stay behind the horse's shoulder. If it does not, and constantly moves forward, the tree points of the saddle will drive into the horse's shoulders, first producing a buildup of scar tissue on his scapula, then chipping away cartilage and bone. This can lead to persistent unsoundness, possible long-term damage, and premature retirement.

In order to avoid this kind of damage, it is crucial that the angle of the tree be adjusted to match the angle of the horse's shoulder. Think of two sliding doors. If they are properly aligned, one will slide freely past the other. If they are not, one door will jam into the other. It is the same with the horse's shoulders and the angle of the tree. As the horse moves, his shoulder rotates upward and backwards. If the tree angle does not match the angle of the shoulder, it will be unable to rotate freely under the saddle, compromising movement, sometimes severely.

CHECKING AND MEASURING THE TREE ANGLE

We recommend a tool like the SprengerTM gauge to determine if the tree angle matches the angle of the horse's shoulder. The Sprenger goes behind the shoulder blade, and is set so that the upper arm of the device is parallel to the angle of the horse's scapula. The tree of the saddle should be adjusted so that the tree angle matches that of the shoulder.

To determine if the tree angle on the saddle is correct for the horse, put the saddle on without a saddle pad. Check if the angle of the piping on the front of the flap matches the angle of the horse's shoulder. If it does, the angle of the tree is correctly adjusted.

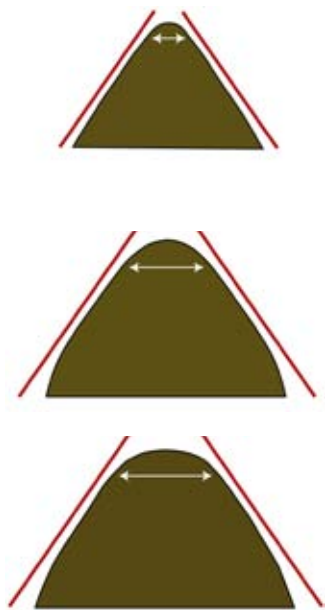


Baroque-style horses especially need to have saddles that accommodate freedom over the withers to allow their huge moving shoulders to move freely. While Thoroughbreds often have the paradox of "narrow wide trees" (to accommodate narrow shoulders but big withers), Baroque horses (Lusitano, Andalusian, etc.) usually have little to no withers and really wide shoulders, resulting in a need for wide narrow trees.

TREE WIDTH AND SHOULDER ROTATION

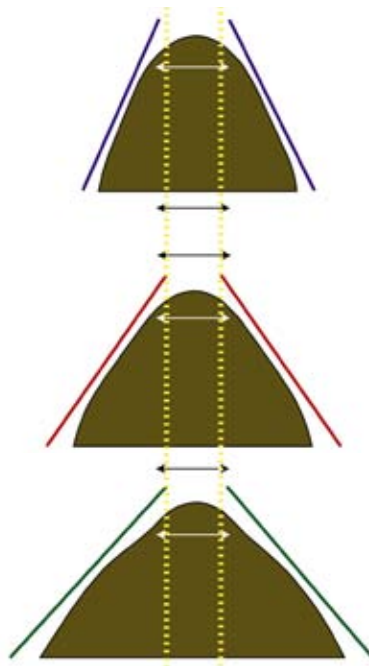
The tree width must be enough for the horse's shoulders to rotate freely. Often, we see a saddle with a tree width that is too narrow for a particular horse. Not only do the shoulders not move freely

Same Angle - Different Width



Tree width and angle are two very different things. The tree width needs to be wide enough to allow the horse's shoulders to rotate freely. These three angles are the same, even though the widths are different.

Same Width - Different Angles



This illustration shows how you can have the same tree width, with three different angles. The tree angle should be adjusted to match that of the horse's shoulder.

under such a saddle, but the saddle can be driven forward on top of the shoulders while you are riding. This will result in the problems we discussed above. Trying to make a saddle that is too narrow fit by adding more padding is akin to wearing another pair of socks to make shoes fit if they're already too tight – it won't work!

If the tree width is too wide, the entire saddle may rock or slip from side to side when it's being ridden, or the back half of the saddle may twist to one side or the other (this

Telltale Behaviors

If you are STILL UNCERTAIN IF THE ANGLE of the tree is correct, observe the horse's behavior under saddle. If the tree angle is too wide, there may be clearance on the top of the withers, but the saddle will pinch the sides of the withers. It will also hit the reflex point (cranial nerve 11) that restricts movement in the shoulders and makes the horse unwilling or unable to move forward freely. The horse will raise his head or hollow his back, or exhibit other forms of resistance until the reflex point/nerve becomes numb. If your horse behaves in this manner, it may be because the tree angle of the saddle is incorrect.

One of the most common "excuses" heard is that "he has to be ridden for awhile and warmed up before he'll listen". What is really happening here is that the horse is being ridden until he becomes numb to the pain! Even though a saddle may look like it fits while the horse is standing still, the angle may actually change when he begins to move.



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may also happen when one side of the horse – usually the left – is more heavily muscled, forcing the saddle over to the other side in compensation).

Saddle makers and fitters should consider both tree width and tree angle when fitting a saddle to a particular horse. Tree width and angle need to be adjusted together. If the width of the tree is correct for the horse but the angle is not, the saddle will not fit. The same applies if the angle is good, but the width is not. Adding or removing flocking from the vertical panels of the saddle will not solve the problem – the gullet plate needs to be adjusted. Some self-adjustable gullet plates will accommodate angle adjustment, but will not allow width adjustment (over the wither area). At times, both the width and angle of the saddle's tree are incorrect for a particular horse, possibly causing restrictive movement damage.

Your saddle plays a crucial role in the well being and performance of your horse. If you are in doubt of your current saddle's fit, or are having a challenge finding something to fit your wider mount, contact a certified saddle fitting professional in your area to give you a diagnostic evaluation. 

The spinalis muscle

A properly FITTED SADDLE has a tree that is wide enough and an angle that is correctly adjusted to avoid hitting the spinalis muscle. This is also a reflex point that inhibits or completely stops forward movement. In order to locate the spinalis muscle, draw a line 4" down from the base of the withers, and then draw a horizontal line back. The saddle must stay off that triangle.



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JOCHEN SCHLEESE IS A CERTIFIED MASTER SADDLER WHO GRADUATED FROM PASSIER, AND CAME TO CANADA AS OFFICIAL SADDLER AT THE 1986 WORLD DRESSAGE CHAMPIONSHIPS. HE REGISTERED THE TRADE OF SADDLERY IN NORTH AMERICA IN 1990. JOCHEN'S LIFELONG STUDY OF EQUINE DEVELOPMENT, SADDLE DESIGN, THE BIO-MECHANICS OF HORSE AND RIDER IN MOTION, AND THE EFFECTS OF ILL-FITTING SADDLES, LED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SADDLEFIT 4 LIFE IN 2005 (SADDLEFIT4LIFE.COM), A GLOBAL NETWORK OF EQUINE PROFESSIONALS DEDICATED TO PROTECTING HORSE AND RIDER FROM LONG TERM DAMAGE. SCHLEESE.COM