



The areas marked in white on the horse's back are the saddle-support areas, which are essentially the position of the longissimus muscles.



Just because your saddle fits your horse today doesn't mean it will forever. His body will inevitably change over time, and along with it, his saddle fit needs.

The saddle is too long for this horse's back.

Saddle fit FOR THE CHANGING HORSE

by Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CSE

There's a misconception that if you purchase a custom saddle, or have your saddle fitted to your horse, it will fit for life. This is incorrect! Your horse's conformation will change over the course of his life due to many influences, the least of which are his age and level of training.

To illustrate some of these influences, consider a circle surrounding the horse and divided into eight equal pieces (as shown in the accompanying picture). Only one of these pieces represents the rider; the others represent the trainer, the veterinarian, other body workers, nutrition, the blacksmith, the horse's age and condition, and last but not least, the tack – including bits, bridles, girths, saddles and pads.

The saddle, and the saddle fitter's work, must never be considered in isolation, since all the pieces in the circle of influence are somewhat interdependent. For example, if the horse's training methods or nutrition is altered, his conformation will change. It follows logically that the saddle

will no longer fit – and the reason is not because the saddle fitter did a bad job, but because the horse's back shape has been altered.

THE CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

Saddle fitting is an attempt to prevent long term damage to the horse's back by alleviating pressure on the reflex points, and distributing the rider's weight optimally over his back. Keeping the horse sound and the rider healthy should be the ultimate goal for each and every one of the pieces in the circle of influence. They all need to work together cooperatively to achieve this. Each and any change affected by one of the pieces in the circle (either positive or negative) will have a consequence on the others – with the simple end result that the saddle may no longer be balanced properly or fit correctly.

YOUR HORSE'S SHAPE WILL CHANGE

It is a given that over the course of a horse's life, his three-dimensional back shape will change many times. It's just like humans – as we grow up, our bodies change; as we exercise or

TEMPORARY SADDLE FIT SOLUTIONS

You may not always have immediate access to your saddle fitter, so there are some “Band-Aid” solutions available. Some are probably more feasible than others, but you do have options:

- a) Stop riding your horse until the saddle can be checked and refitted.
- b) Use shims in your saddle pad (gel pads with pockets to fit shims front and back on both sides as needed are a good temporary expedient to avoid hurting your horse).
- c) Lunge your horse to exercise him.
- d) Try a different saddle or bareback pad for a few days.

train, our bodies change; and as we age or change the way we eat, our bodies change. The same is true for the horse. Obviously, any of these changes may throw off saddle fit to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how extreme the change has been.

All things being equal, the shape of the horse’s back and especially the length of the saddle support area (from the base of the wither to the last thoracic vertebra) will change most significantly at ages three, five and eight. This can cause frustration for the rider because it will definitely require a saddle fit adjustment to accommodate wider shoulders, higher withers, and more muscling on the back. As a rule, we generally suggest annual maintenance check-ups and tune-ups regardless; this frequency will increase if there are extenuating circumstances such as increased training, changed nutrition, or a shift in any of the factors in the “circle of influence”, any of which can ultimately affect saddle fit.

THE MYTH OF “CUSTOM” SADDLES

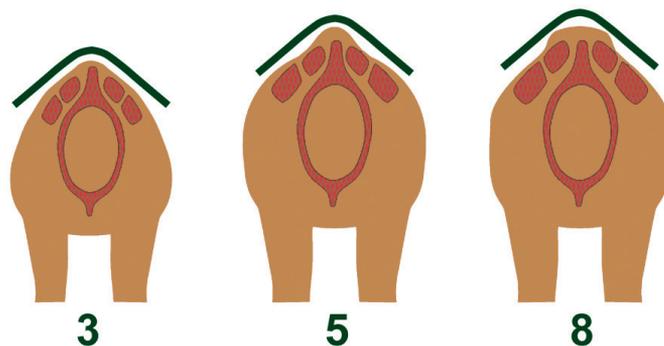
One of the problems with buying a “custom” saddle is that uneducated riders often expect the saddle to fit “as is” for the rest of the horse’s life. This seems a bit silly if you consider that even a car needs regular servicing and maintenance – and this is a hunk of steel without the added twist of having to work as an ongoing interface between two living beings, the way a saddle does. Even a saddle that has been regularly maintained and serviced, since being purchased for a young horse a few years past, may often have to be exchanged simply because the saddle support area has grown smaller as the horse has matured and the saddle is now simply too long for his back!

The shoulders have muscled up and physically moved further upwards and backwards; this simply means that the saddle placement behind the shoulder (as usual) means it is already

further back by a couple of inches and now encroaches past the last thoracic vertebrae to impinge on the kidneys or ovaries. This is the area that possesses what we call the “bucking reflex” – a commonly seen result.

The bottom line is that saddle fit should be checked a minimum of once a year, and more often if there are other things going on in your horse’s life. Whatever the reason behind a change, it is never a good idea to ride your horse in a poorly fitting saddle for an extended period. Of all of the pieces in the “circle of influence”, it’s the saddle (as the interface between horse and rider) that has the potential to inflict the most physiological damage. 

Training during this time will affect the muscular conformation and, as a result, the three-dimensional back shape and its saddle support area will change.



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Jochen Schlee came to Canada in 1986 to establish and register the trade of saddlery in North America, operating the only authorized saddlery training facility in Ontario. Schlee is the world-leading manufacturer of saddles designed for women, specializing in the unique anatomical requirements of female riders. Schlee provides diagnostic saddle fit analysis and saddle fitting services across North America to maintain optimal saddle fit to horse and rider. Saddleft 4 Life educational programs and certification courses are held throughout the world. His first book “Suffering in Silence: The Saddle Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses”, is available from HorseBooksetc. and through Amazon.com in hard cover or e-format. Saddlesforwomen.com ; Saddleft4life.com ; Schlee.com ; 800-225-2242