

# Accessories

## The 'Other' Stuff You Need to Ride!

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CSE

I don't want to get into what helmet, gloves, or breeches to choose; this article deals with the other components you need to 'dress' the horse. It is surprising to a lot of riders how the accessories which we use with our saddles can really affect the way that our equipment as a whole works. From pads to stirrup irons to stirrup leathers to girths, these accessories can affect not only the feel of your saddle but the actual way that the saddle is fitting the horse. When a saddle is fitting properly pads, cruppers, and breast collars should become unnecessary. The correct accessories for you and your horse have to be considered along with the correct saddle for both of you.

The biggest business and almost the most money spent in the horse world is in the pads industry. Bumper pads, keyhole pads, fuzzy sheepskin, or gel pads - the list goes on and on. When the saddle fits the horse, only one pad is needed. The purpose of any pad is to reduce friction on the horses back and to absorb the sweat so that it does not eat away at the leather of your saddle. The more pads we put under a saddle, the harder it becomes to fit the saddle to the horse.

The other very important thing to remember when choosing a pad is to consider the shape of your horse's back. It is not straight from croup to neck but curves with a high point at the withers. Therefore it stands to reason that we do not want our saddle pads to be straight from front to back. Hold the pad up in front of you and check that it does have a wither relief area built into the pad. A straight pad will pull on the horses wither and put pressure onto the very sensitive trapezius muscle. The shaped pad with the relief is much easier on your horse's back.

We also have to consider the ramifications when we are using a saddle for more than one horse. The gel pad is a fabulous tool and works very well except that it is again straight from back to front and again causes pull on the trapezius. If you have a gel pad you would not mind sacrificing, cut it down the middle, and tape the area where you cut. You can purchase a pad that has the same wither relief as your regular pad but has pockets down the side to



Wither Relief Saddle Pad: The saddle pad should be shaped to accommodate the natural topline of the horse, including room for the withers at the front.

hold the gel inserts. This gives the wither area the room it needs but also now allows the heat to escape properly from the horses back. However, this is only a short-term solution and does not provide long-term fit. Pads should always be kept clean, which is why a thin cotton pad is the best recommendation for a well-fitting saddle; it's easy to wash!

Stirrup irons and leathers have very little to do with saddle fit to the horse but do affect the way a saddle will feel to a rider. Very stiff thick leathers have a tendency to feel very thick under the leg and can make the saddle feel wider than it is. Also when the leather is very inflexible it will give the leg less freedom to move and therefore make it more difficult to use your aids. Thinner more flexible leathers give the rider a closer feel and also allow for easier leg movement. Important here is to watch that the holes are not frayed or 'elongated' through too much use; replace the leathers as often as necessary.



Stirrup leathers made with a soft leather with a nylon core for strength and to prevent stretching.

The choice of a stirrup iron is very similar. There are all different quality of irons that you can choose - from cheap to expensive depending on the type of metal used. A newer variation that has become very popular is the jointed irons. The sides are linked with a bicycle chain and covered with rubber which allows the iron to flex while you are riding. This type of iron is easier on the ankles and knees because they flex and allow the ball of the foot to sit flat against the iron instead of just sitting on the edge. They are safer because it is very difficult to get your foot stuck in the stirrup were you to fall from your horse, and dubbed "humane irons" because they are kinder to the rider's foot (based on certain reflexology points of the foot).

One of the accessories which is often paid the least attention to is the girth. There are all sorts of various sizes, shapes and designs of girths but few of them make very much sense when we look at the way they fit the horse. When you girth up on your horse with long billets the girth, when tight, should be within the last two to three holes of the billets. When thermography testing was done on saddle, one of the highest points of heat and friction was found where the

billets lie against the edge of the horse. The less distance between the bottom of the flap and the top of the girth, the less irritation that results. Every saddle has a different flap and billet length depending on the manufacturer and therefore it is necessary to try the different lengths out to see what fits your horse. It is also key to remember that the girth will always seek to lie in the narrowest spot (behind the elbow of the horse), so that if your saddles billets do not hang correctly, the saddle may be pulled forward as a result.

Another common mistake is the shape of the girth. A similar issue was addressed in the choice of proper pads. A



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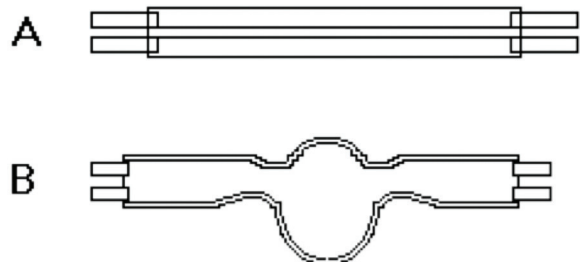


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horse has a curved shape with relief needed in the elbow area, an area easily chafed by the girth. It is necessary to have a girth that has an area cut out behind the elbow. (ie. Girth B is preferable to Girth A, for reasons outlined below)



This gives the horse the ability to move the front leg without being inhibited by the girth itself. The type of girth seen in diagram A is very straight with only one strip of hard leather through the center. This type of girth put all of the pressure onto that thin leather strap and therefore almost acts as a 'knife' across a horse's sternum and pectorals. The girth seen in diagram B has the cut-outs for the elbow and also the hard leather goes all the way out to the edges with a soft leather backing which disperses the pressure over a much larger surface area and therefore makes the horse more comfortable. A girth with a wider center also helps to stabilize a saddle from slipping side to side or going forward.

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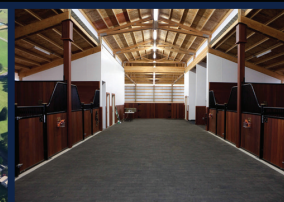
One of the major controversies where girths are concerned is elastic versus no elastic girths on the ends. If a girth has no elastic then there is no give at all once a saddle is girthed up. This means that we have a solid leather band around the horse's ribcage and therefore around the horse's lung area. Often a horse will be short of breath or irritable after being ridden in this type of girth because they have not been able to breathe properly. A girth with only one side of elastic is both better and worse. The advantage is that now the ribcage has room to expand the downside is that the give is only on one side and therefore can pull the saddle off to that side and cause unevenness in the horse's way of going and development. The best situation is a girth with both sides of elastic but the elastic has to be strong and short. If the elastic is too weak or too long the girth loses its stability and will stretch allowing the saddle to move around on the horse's back. On a short girth the elastic should be no more than an inch long and on a long girth the elastic should be no more than 2 ½ inches in length - this will give the ribcage the room it needs while keeping the saddle stable on the horse's back. Of the major accessories the girth is the most important as it directly affects the way that your saddle is fitting and how it feels to your horse. Watch for fraying at the elastic and buckle attachments.

There's a new girth on the market that is being touted 'the shoulder relief' girth. The only problem with it is that it seems to actually give so much relief at the shoulder



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8" wide dressage girth with 'cut-outs' in the shoulder area and 1" elastic on both ends.



5" wide dressage girth. The more a girth is able to distribute weight over a larger surface area, the more comfortable the horse will be. All of the girths shown here are 'BSE' or Both Sides Elastic contour girths with varying shield sizes. We have found the 5" and 8" shields to be the most popular sizes.



Jumping girth with relief cut-outs in the shoulder area and 2 1/2" length elastic at the buckles on both sides.

that it pulls the saddle back beyond the saddle support area at the 18th thoracic vertebra.

There are several other types of accessories that we put on our horses but these are the ones most commonly used and most commonly the wrong size or shape. When considering a horse's discomfort we have to look at all of

the things that would be influencing that comfort. Once we have ruled out the saddle the accessories are a good aspect to double check to make sure that we are offering our horses the best comfort possible. In a future article I will address how billet alignment also affects girth position and the placement of your saddle.

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