Saddle Fit and Bad Behavior

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It has been my experience that horses do not consciously 'misbehave' (an anthropomorphism that is often incorrectly attributed to horses who are simply reacting to outside stimuli resulting in unwanted conduct). As such, the following situation could be clearly attributed to a fairly straightforward cause-and-effect situation that became very obvious very quickly. At the height of its manifestation, what happened is shown in the accompanying picture.

Rummy Royal, a beautiful dark bay 11-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding, was behaving more and more erratically each time his owner (KG) wanted to begin her riding lessons with him. Rummy was normally kept out in the field in daily turnout with the rest of the horses, being brought in only when temperatures fell below 10 °C. It was only during show season that this routine was changed to constant stabling except for the maybe two hours each day when KG wanted to train. This went on for 6 months of the year from late spring to mid-fall; thereafter the situation reverted more to the 'natural' state of constant socialization and grazing in a herd-like surrounding of 7 other horses.

While Rummy did not develop any of the stereotypies normally cited as characteristic indicators of stress while he was stabled, he did demonstrate several unwanted behaviors while being prepared for schooling. As soon as KG appeared with his saddle, the ears were pinned. As she saddled up, he reached around to nip her. Some horses resent the saddle so much because they equate it with pain or hard work they'd rather avoid that they even kick out. This aggressive behavior may be a simple defense mechanism which has occurred in horses which have grown to associate ridden work with pain. He showed "girthiness" – going beyond the simple inhalation of breath to expand his ribcage to actually almost buckling at the front 'knees' when the girth was tightened. It is to be considered that sensitivity in this region is probably more related to pain than any disobedience or desire to avoid work. The problems didn't end here, however. After she led him outside and tried to mount, the evasive behavior became downright dangerous, as he began sidestepping away from the mounting block and actually reared as soon as she tried to put her foot in the stirrup. This went beyond a simple reaction to present or anticipated pain; this was an indication of something seriously wrong – and all of the evidence seemingly pointed to the saddle, based on our years of observation in this field.

We got KG to put the horse into the crossties and remove the girth and saddle. Sure enough, the saddle was the epitome of the traditional English construction methods that in no way accommodated or considered the horse's conformation in its design. Using our basic evaluation methodology which could be easily understood by the rider as a layman (or woman) in the science of saddle fitting, we discussed the 9 points of saddle fit and how this particular saddle did not adhere to most of them in its construction. In particular however, the forward facing tree points and pinching gullet plate caused the horse pain when it was asked to move – to the point that it did everything possible to ensure the rider didn't add her weight on top of the already tight saddle.

The horse's shoulder blade (and the sensitive cartilage at the distal end) hit the tree point with every movement (where the scapula rotated upwards and backwards and smacked against the point with each step). The gullet plate pinched the horse with insufficient space not only at the top of the withers but without room all around the pommel, to allow the shoulder muscle space to expand and slip through underneath the saddle (akin to a sliding door). In addition, the angle of the gullet plate at the tree points did not accommodate the angle of the shoulder blade, again impacting movement.

The gullet was extremely narrow on this saddle – barely 1 ½" between the panels, which meant that the spinal processes, sensitive nuchal ligament, and the vertebral nerves were all being pinched – especially with the added weight of the rider. In addition, this saddle was simply too long for this horse's saddle support area, which ends at the 18th thoracic vertebra, but is often ignored in saddle manufacturing.

Although we didn't get a chance to actually see KG ride in this saddle, as Rummy indeed never let her get on, she did confirm that the saddle always slipped to the right when she rode – again underlining the fact that the gullet plate had not been adjusted to accommodate the stronger muscling of the left shoulder. When this is the case, the movement will result

in the saddle being pushed back by the stronger shoulder and twisting over the horse's back – impinging the S-I joint and causing all sorts of further issues, but most of all – pain!

So – how to fix this? Simple solution – using a saddle with a fully adjustable tree, the necessary changes were made to accommodate Rummy's conformation. The gullet width between the panels was 3 ½" (it is easy to feel where the spinal processes are and where the muscle begins, which is what supports the panel and indicates the necessary gullet width). The gullet plate was fitted asymmetrically to align with Rummy's shoulder muscling, and both of these changes were enough to provide a more comfortable saddle for his back. In addition, he was led to a different area of the barn to be saddled – in the hope that the distraction of a new location would also serve to lessen the anxiety. This was done on purpose to overcome some of the context specific responses of Rummy vs. saddle. Although he exhibited the same flattening of the ears when KG showed up with the different saddle, you could immediately see the relief in his eyes when he was girthed up and the expected pain didn't appear. He allowed KG to get on without evasion at the mounting block, and she stated that she could feel the difference in his movements – riding all three gaits in both directions in 20 m. circles just to test it out.

We always say the eyes and the ears don't lie. You need to learn to 'listen' to your horse and read the signs. Would it be that all 'behavioral' problems were solved so easily!

Watch Video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZgTrCw-qmQ