

Q & A

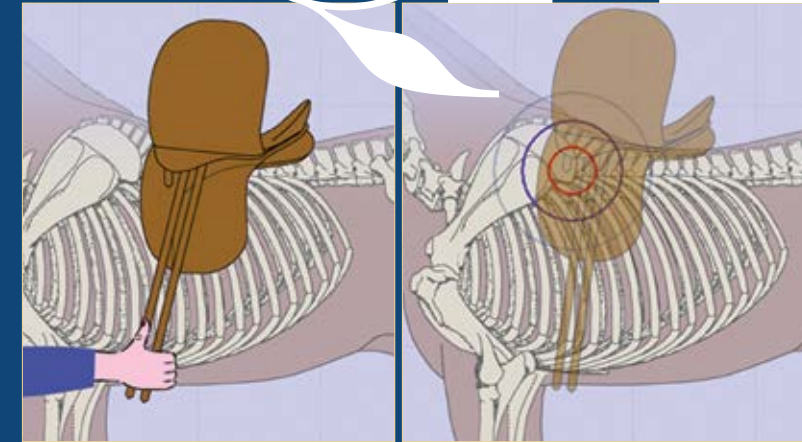
Q. WHERE SHOULD THE SADDLE BE POSITIONED ON THE HORSE'S BACK? TRAINING

ANSWERED BY
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A. There are many opinions where exactly a saddle should sit correctly, and it may depend somewhat on the discipline you are riding in. The fact remains the saddle should stay off the shoulder and be placed before the 18th thoracic vertebra. This is what is called the 'saddle support area' (SSA) and is relatively simple to find on your horse. It's sometimes surprising how small this area actually is even on what seems a long-backed horse, and as the horse matures, it can actually grow smaller as the shoulder muscles grow larger and move the shoulder blade further back.

The SSA begins about four fingers behind the base of the withers (making sure that the tree points are always behind the back edge of the shoulder blade) and ends at the 18th floating rib. You can easily find this if you follow the hair line up to the spine and feel where the lumbar begin and the ribs end.

You want to make sure that your cantle is slightly higher than the pommel, and that your billets (short or long) are hanging down perpendicular to the ground. Since your girth will always gravitate to the narrowest part of the chest under the elbows, it could happen that the pressure on the billets will pull the saddle forward over the shoulder during movement. This could cause damage to the sensitive shoulder cartilage over time.



Conversely, if your saddle ends up sliding back into the sensitive lumbar area, this could hit the reflex point which causes bucking, or it could cause the horse pain in its kidney area or at the ovaries. You want to make sure that the girth is tight enough to prevent slippage, but of course not so tight that the horse can't breathe!

If your horse is reluctant to bend laterally you may have an issue with the width of the gullet channel. The gullet channel needs to be wide enough to provide complete spinal clearance. There is no such thing as "one size fits all". Rather, the width of each horse's spine will determine how wide his saddle's gullet channel must be – usually 4-5 fingers wide. It's very important the width of the gullet channel be the same throughout the entire length of the saddle. Often we see saddles with correct gullet channels width at the front, then narrowing towards the back (the horse's spine and surrounding ligaments do not get narrower over the length of his saddle-support area). A very common problem is a saddle where the gullet channel is too narrow - sitting on the horse's spine and/or ligaments. This can be seen when the horse goes around a corner: if the horse is tracking to the left, the saddle shifts to the right (and the left-side panel rests on the horse's spine/ligaments). This must be avoided! A saddle that sits on the horse's spine/ligaments will cause him to tighten his back muscles and hollow his back, producing exactly the opposite of the nice rounded back that we want - especially in dressage. In the long-term, a saddle with too narrow of a gullet channel will cause permanent, irreversible, and often career-ending injury or damage to the horse's back. The most severe result is spinal stenosis (compression and narrowing

of the spinal canal) and spondylosis (degeneration of the vertebrae). Check my '9 Points of Saddle Fit' tips and videos on our Schleese You Tube Channel.

Your horse will tell you if he's comfortable – as the rider you will feel whether he responds readily to your aids, or seems resistant because something may be 'off'.

Author of 'Suffering in Silence - The Saddle fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses' (2013) Jochen Schleese holds Saddlefit 4 Life® lectures and seminars through professional associations to educate riders and professionals to recognize and prevent saddle fit issues. Find answers to your questions in a personal 80 point Saddle Fit Evaluation for horse and rider.

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