

Saddle Fit Q and A

by Jochen Schleese Certified Master Saddler, Saddle Ergonomist

Q I have heard that there are now adjustable treeless saddles available on the market that are totally able to accommodate my horse's shape. Why do I still have difficulty maintaining my position on the saddle if it fits my horse so well?

A There will always be fans and naysayers of treeless saddles; in my opinion they are more accurately called 'bareback pads' however I do recognize the advances made in the design over the years. Unfortunately, the lack of a tree still means that essentially these saddles simply cannot support the vertical spinal column of the rider while protecting the horse's spinal column from pressure and rider weight. Essentially, the rider almost doubles his/her weight (it is like riding bareback as far as the horse is concerned!) and this pressure will impact the reflex points of the horse – which results in negative behavior (including resistance, lack of engagement, stumbling, bucking, tripping, etc.)

A few years ago we actually did a gait analysis experiment comparing treeless saddles with treed saddles to determine the effect of saddle fit on horse performance at all three gaits. The results were measured using thermography, a computerized saddle pad, and the gait analysis software, resulting in a huge printout of data for analysis. In addition, we got rider feedback which was somewhat more subjective – but the bottom line was that over the long run the freedom of movement was not supported in a treeless saddle, nor did the riders feel balanced, supported, or positioned properly.



Damage to dorsal ligament system is often the result of using treeless saddles or from a gullet channel that is too narrow. The rider's weight is not equally or optimally distributed over the weight bearing surface of the horse's saddle support area, and sits mainly on the spine.

Although your saddle may seem to fit your horse 'superficially' and statically, please understand that you are not really doing him or yourself any favors. There is a reason that saddles have trees – in a properly fitted saddle they are there to protect both your and your horse's back!



Female rider does not have necessary support behind her pelvic area to sit correctly in balance and in position. Position of the pelvis is shown in the approximate position it would be in a treeless saddle. Rider is tilted backward from the vertical (green line) along the axis shown by the red line.

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*Jochen is the author of *The Silent Killer* (2012) and *Suffering in Silence – the Saddle Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses* (2013). Discover optimal saddle fit to your & your horse in a Saddlefit 4 Life 80 pt Diagnostic Saddle Fit Evaluation www.Saddlefit4life.com
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